

Dressage Today

“Ask the Experts” Column

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Question:

“I would like to take my horse to a Materiale class, but how do I know if he is suitable? Could you give me a few tips on how to present and train him?”

Name withheld by request.

Answer by Dr. Gail Hoff-Carmona:

Materiale classes are continually growing in popularity for both competitors and spectators because they are group classes designed to showcase young, talented dressage prospects, and almost everyone loves working with and/or watching a young and talented horse.

The purpose of Materiale classes is to identify young dressage prospects with potential to become competitive dressage horses able to progress through the levels. Therefore, if you want to show in these classes, you should first try to select an athletic horse with good conformation and gaits needed for upper level dressage.

There are many different breeds and types of horses which have been bred for different jobs. For instance, a Quarter Horse bred for working cattle should be able to easily look a cow in the eye, so he shouldn't be too tall. He needs to be built a little downhill - croup higher than withers. He also needs to be very agile and quick in order to turn and move rapidly. Likewise, a racing Thoroughbred needs a relatively low set neck so he can stretch it out for balance and to breathe easily when galloping.

In contrast, a dressage prospect needs a more up hill balance with the neck set fairly high and well arched with a fairly long and open throat. The back should be strong (not hollow or swayed) with well developed muscling over the loin area, thus creating a strong connection to a long, slightly sloping pelvis. The pelvis of the horse acts like a pump handle, so a long pelvis will allow more thrust than a short one. The center of the horse should be about the same size as the forehand and the hindquarter, making a well balanced dressage horse comprised of three equal sections – the forequarter, the back and the hindquarter. When viewing the horse from the side, the withers should be a little higher than or level with, the pelvis.

Horses that are bred to race or move quickly usually have fairly quick rhythm in their gaits without very much suspension (moment of air time when all 4 feet are off the ground.) In contrast, a good dressage horse needs to develop more power than speed so his gaits should be in a slower rhythm with a clear moment of suspension in the trot and canter.

The judges in a Material class are going to reward the horses that show their gaits to their best advantage and also present themselves as good “riding types.” This means that dressage horses should be built to easily carry the weight of a rider while moving forward with free and cadenced steps, as if their feet were on springs. And, they need to show suspension in the trot and canter.

Draft breeds, for instance, are certainly sturdy enough to carry the weight of a rider, but their hind limb conformation is constructed to pull weight rather than to push under the body and lift the rider. Likewise, while horses that are naturally short strided and lack swing in their backs might be comfortable for a rider to sit on, they will not be able to produce the desired amount of forwardness, suspension and springiness in their gaits for dressage.

Materiale classes are open to 3-, 4-, and 5-year-old horses. Age groups may be combined but not sexes except in championships. Horses are shown in a group at the walk, trot and canter in both directions. The 4- and 5-year-olds may also be asked to lengthen their stride in trot or canter. If 3-year-olds are grouped with them, none of the horses in that class will be required to lengthen the stride.

To get your horse ready for a Materiale class, simply train him according to the basics of dressage. As a guideline, a 3-year-old horse should be doing the equivalent of Training Level. Four and 5-year old horses should be doing First and Second Level work.

Although you show only walk, trot and canter in Materiale classes, I recommend using the U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) dressage tests as a training guideline, since younger horses would be doing less advanced exercises than the older ones in their everyday training. The USDF tests introduce movements in a logical sequence to help the horse progressively gain better balance, suppleness, impulsion, straightness and collection. The U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF) *Rule Book* (available on line at www.usef.org) is also an excellent source of information regarding rules and regulations. It also provides descriptive and precise requirements of every gait and movement shown in dressage at any level.

All of the gaits should show the correct purity (four-beat walk, two-beat trot, three beat canter) together with a steady rhythm and regularity. The walk should be balanced and active, but not rushed. It should also show a good overstep (hind hooves tracking over the prints of the front hooves) and the horse should be reaching equally from both the shoulders and haunches. The horse's back should swing easily and be elastic producing ground-covering steps with a marching quality.

The best trots and canters will show good articulation of the joints with natural engagement and a soft, elastic and swinging back. Cavaletti work can be an adjunct training aid for this. In addition, the trot and canter should be free from the shoulders and haunches, should show roundness and display uphill balance with power and upward thrust, natural impulsion and suspension.

Ten percent of the score in a Materiale class is based on general impression. A good Materiale horse should look the part in that he should have correct conformation and athletic ability in order to show off his talent. His physical development should be in accordance with his age and conditioning and he should demonstrate the character and temperament necessary for training as well as some sparkle or presence.

In a Materiale Class it is best to ride your horse forward in an uphill balance without restricting the gaits. The horse needs to be "on the aids" so he rounds his back and pushes himself up to contact. A horse on "auto pilot" that is not rounding himself and seeking contact with the bit is not yet ready for this class. Small mistakes, such as picking up the wrong lead at the canter but correcting it right away, are rather insignificant if your horse shows willingness to be ridden and goes forward. Horses that are restricted by the rider, on the forehand or unwilling to go forward will have difficulty in a Materiale class.

Although there is not a specific score for the rider, it almost goes without saying that both horse and rider should be well turned out. Riders who have correct seats and a good feeling for the horse will have a far better chance of producing a winning ride than those who grip with their legs or hang onto the reins for their own balance. Such riders will restrict the horse whether they want to or not.

So ride forward in balance with expression and power. See yourself, in your mind's eye, on the most brilliant, high-quality horse you can dream of, and try turning that dream into reality in the Materiale class.