

## Gaited Dressage: Bridging Two Worlds For Unbridled Rewards

Two thousand years ago a Greek Cavalry soldier and historian by the name of Xenophon developed and introduced a way of riding powerful, muscular steeds effectively and lightly into battle. His methods were based on balance, communication, trust, agility, and partnership between horse and soldier. These methods became the foundation of dressage, the discipline that today still inspires the same absolute connection between horse and rider that it did centuries ago.

Modern dressage still values the original principles that Xenophon fostered, striving toward enhancing and expressing a horse's natural athleticism and willingness to work with an empathetic rider. To observe a horse and rider performing in the highest levels of dressage, known as the FEI levels, is to watch a ballet of delicate strength and nearly invisible communication, between two completely different species, giving the impression that they are one body. The goal is to effortlessly guide a horse through complex maneuvers and predetermined patterns or tests. The result is simply stunning. Although extremely complicated, this degree of air-light perfection applies to the FEI levels, which include fourth level through Grand Prix.

However, the United States Dressage Federation (USDF) recognizes dressage riders as any rider wishing to learn and compete in dressage tests, performing maneuvers with graduating difficulty, from Intro level all the way up to Third level. Pretty cool for people who want to reap the benefits on a basic level, even if eventual upper level competition is not their "thing." Anyone can enjoy the benefits of basic dressage that encourage lightness, acceptance of the bit, balanced transitions and gaits, and improved cooperation between partners, regardless of how dedicated and serious the individual is about the sport.

In upper levels of competitive dressage, the breeds of horses mostly seen in the arena include Warmblood Sport Horses, Thoroughbreds, PRE breeds such as Andalusians and Lusitanos, with the occasional Quarter Horse and even a Morgan here and there. These breeds, especially those with shorter coupling (the loin area that connects the back to the croup or rump) and built slightly uphill, such as the baroque or PRE (Pura Raza Espanola) horses, do very well in the extreme physically demanding world of the higher levels. However, this is not to say that gaited horses can't excel in dressage, even in the upper levels. Exceptions to the norm exist in almost all facets of life, including dressage. All breeds of horses can benefit from basic and lower levels of dressage but some gaited horses, through dedication and astonishing talent, have excelled to teetering heights. Champagne Watchout, the multiple versatility TWH champion, is such an exception.

Jennie Jackson, her husband Nathanael, and Champagne Watchout, of Cookeville, Tennessee, have made it their mission to promote the benefits of dressage to all gaited horses, regardless of the level of their potential. Using the training pyramid of dressage, Jennie uses Champagne Watchout to demonstrate how dressage cross-training "teaches a horse to be a good load-carrying animal and teaches a rider to be a good load to carry." Champagne Watchout has won several championships in gaited dressage at the second and third level, as well as performing freestyle demonstration, where the horse and rider perform high level dressage maneuvers set to music, at the Kentucky Horse Park. His list of dressage-related success continues.

In classical dressage, the training pyramid is used as a roadmap, if you will, to achieving as

much lightness, connection, and balance as is possible for horse and rider at whatever level they are currently training. For each level of dressage, the training pyramid applies, in varying degrees. Once one portion of the pyramid is accounted for, horse and rider can work on establishing the next. One of the greatest attractions about dressage is that no level can be skipped and no shortcuts can be used -- if a component of the pyramid or level is skipped, it will be completely obvious if the horse and rider attempts to move on.

The classical German training pyramid, beginning with the base and working its way to the top, is rhythm, suppleness, contact, impulsion, straightness, and collection. Rhythm is the mental and physical relaxation of the horse while maintaining a steady beat during any gait. Suppleness applies to both longitudinal softness that affects the horse's neck, poll, back, jaw, and haunches while swinging forward, and lateral softness that relates to bending his body or neck sideways. Contact is the horse accepting the rider's hands, legs, and seat with energy coming from his engaged hindquarters. Impulsion is energy caused by the rider's seat that flows into the horse's hindquarters, allows his back to swing, and the energy of impulsion to be carried out through the lengthening of stride. Straightness is when the previous elements fall together concisely enough so that the horse's hind legs step directly into the line created by the front legs. Finally, collection can happen when all components have been obtained and the horse's balance is shifted to his hindquarters, allowing absolute self-carriage to finally take place. Notice how collection is the very top, which indicates that collection simply cannot happen without all the other components in place. Likewise, no progress in dressage can happen without rhythm.

The components of the training pyramid may appear confusing and may not at first seem like they could apply to gaited breeds. However, as mentioned before, any breed can benefit from learning to achieve lightness, balance, and communication. The Jacksons believe that dressage "turns people into riders." The Jacksons firmly believe that regardless of the horse, all riders want the same things: rhythm, suppleness, straightness, and impulsion. Dressage is a way to achieving this universal ideal.

In order to start teaching gaited horse owners just how valuable and useable the training pyramid and dressage is, they started Dressage En-Gait in 1998, with the help of Champagne Watchout. Jennie Jackson uses Dressage En-Gait to teach people how to enhance their horsemanship and training goals with dressage. One advantage she offers with Dressage En-Gait is that the training improves a gaited horse's ideal broken lateral gait through dressage. A horse who paces, a two beat lateral gait, such as a Walker, can develop his broken lateral running walk through dressage. Another advantage to dressage cross-training is that even a trail horse needs to learn to side pass over a pole or be supple enough to listen to its rider when necessary.

When it comes to incorporating gait into dressage, many people still scratch their heads over how a gaited horse can be trained to do a "traditional" breed's sport. Dressage En-Gait serves as a means for improving any gaited horse's performance, but it may come as a surprise to know that the unique gaits of gaited breeds can replace "trot" on tests to allow gaited owners to enjoy the same competitive results as any other dressage rider. For example, an extended trot in dressage, which is a working trot with increased impulsion and length of stride, would be the running walk in gaited dressage. A working trot would be a flat walk. Canter, including cantering maneuvers such as the Canter Pirouette, remain the same, as well as the medium

walk, collected walk, free walk, and extended walk.

According to the Jacksons, the main rule to remember when riding a gaited horse dressage is that a diagonal moving horse, or the horse that trots, will be judged on traditional tests at a competition and gaited horses, who are mostly 4-beat broken-lateral gaiting breeds, subscribe to a different test. The Jacksons accept that gaited horses are not Warmbloods, but do understand that a gaited horse is just as capable doing dressage in gait as a trotting horse can performing a diagonal gait. Some gaited horses are taught to trot and then are shown in dressage, but discerning the difference is important in attempting to mold the gaited horse to the sport of dressage.

In the vein of promoting the gaited horse in dressage and educating riders about the differences in gait, one of the most outstanding, and recent, accomplishments is the Jackson's invitation to provide a five to six day demonstration on gaited dressage at the World Equestrian Games, to be held for the first time ever in the United States at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, KY, from September 25 - October 10, 2010. The FEI, the elite upper-level registry of dressage in Europe, personally invited the Jacksons and Champagne Watchout to promote the versatility of and breakthrough acceptance of the talented, athletic gaited horse and the fact that dressage is extremely beneficial to any horse and rider.

After basics have been learned, gaits refined, and an improved connection established, many gaited horse owners and their newly balanced, willing partners may want to step into the competitive field of dressage. Many options are available for the budding gaited dressage horse, following guidelines that are based on the rules for all USDF competitions which cover all levels below the FEI levels. Minor, customized exceptions include the specific gaits that were discussed previously and turnout, such as allowing saddle seat attire.

One competitive option is that gaited horse breed associations offer gaited dressage shows at several levels, from statewide to world. Levels start at the Intro Level, which involves two gaits, and progress to Third Level, involving three gaits. Gaited horses are not currently allowed to compete at a USDF recognized show, although dressage schooling shows will allow gaited horses if the management is notified ahead of time and if specified gaited horse tests, approved by USDF, are provided. Jennie Jackson has actually written many of the tests used at TWH dressage shows. Whether the show is open or is a breed association dressage show, these provide great opportunities to introduce the dressage community to the gaited horse, and visa versa. One of the best advantages to showing at any dressage show is that, as the horse and rider perform, only one judge is completely keeping his or her attention on just one competitor at a time. Meanwhile, a scribe writes down every comment the judge makes so when the rider completes the test, the judge sends the comments home with the rider for a mini-lesson, complete with information for improving that next ride.

Another excellent dressage opportunity for gaited horse owners is a recently organized event called the Three Phase Event. Jennie Jackson helps to organize this event, held from May 15-16 of this year. Champagne Watchout claimed the winning title of the Three Phase Event for the first two years of the event's organization. Now in its fourth year, the Three Phase Event is a versatility event held for both gaited and non-gaited horses. Initially the event was designed specifically for gaited horses but it became so popular that people with non-gaited breeds are also more than welcome to attend. Just like three-day eventing, the Three Phase Event consists of dressage, obstacle trail (instead of stadium jumping), and cross country, which is similar to a

shorter version of competitive trail riding, complete with small jumps up to two and a half feet. Check out <http://www.threephaseevent.org/> for more information.

For more information on gaited dressage, see [www.usdf.com](http://www.usdf.com), [www.nwha.com](http://www.nwha.com), and you can learn more about the Jacksons, Champagne Watchout, and Dressage En-Gait at [www.walkinonranch.com](http://www.walkinonranch.com).

Dressage may seem to be a lofty aspiration to some, reserved only for those with Warmbloods or for those whose unflinching dedication is enough to take them all the way to the FEI levels. However, like Nathanael Jackson says, "Dressage is the next big thing for the gaited horse." Through education and experimenting a little with a very rewarding way of riding, any horse, especially any gaited horse, and rider can tap into the centuries-old secret of connection, beauty, and transformation that can be attained by scratching even just the surface of dressage. Take Champagne Watchout's lead and begin to tap your horse's inner dressage talent, waiting for an even more willing and graceful partner to spring up beneath you.