



Maryal Barnett clinic: the 2007 rule changes

What led the Midwest Dressage Association to arrange for this clinic about the new 2007 USDF tests?

The MDA wanted to give everyone who is interested in dressage in our region an opportunity to see the new tests performed, to describe the history of the tests, to delineate what changes are in them, to help people see if they're prepared to ride the new tests and to help them ride the tests better.

The McPhail Center is a great venue for this in the winter because it's warm inside. There are a lot of nice barns out there, but they aren't heated. It isn't easy for horses to just come in and be exposed to big heaters in a normal barn and the McPhail Center is heated already. And there's good parking for easy access even in bad weather.

How do you choose demonstration riders?

It wasn't just me, but a small committee. We tried to take people who are good demonstration riders. That's a real skill. A good one is able to leave their ego at the doorway and lets you use them and their horse to demonstrate rather than them trying to do their very best all of the time.

Most of the demonstration riders for this clinic are people that I have some experience with. They might not be my students but I've seen them ride and I know how they ride. Besides selecting riders who could perform the tests, we looked for riders who lived close enough so that if the February weather was horrible they still could get here.

Have you selected them all?

The list is still tentative. But we think we have these: for 4th level Dr. Robert van Wessan, for 2nd level we have Vanessa Voltman, for 1st level, we have Dr. Hilary Clayton, Training Level is Jesse Myers and for an alternate rider we have Dr. Barb Kintner. We still don't have a 3rd level rider.

This looks like a medical group. Three out of five are veterinarians.

Yes, so it appears! We had to find qualified riders who were near the McPhail Center and MSU. Dr. Clayton will ride an Arab, representing the breeding program at MSU. The van Wessums, Robert and Vanessa, will ride warmbloods. Barb Kintner's horse is an Arab.

Could you describe the changes they'll perform for us at the clinic?

There are mostly small changes in the tests this time around. In 2003 there were major changes. This time they made the tests more friendly for the riders, the horses, the judges and for show management. Some tests have had small changes where they've been shortened or an awkward movement is smoother or there's a little bit of changing in the scoring. For example, in 1st level, we score the transition from a free walk to the medium walk – there's a separate score for that.

The most obvious change in the test is that the rider's score now has a co-efficient of three rather than two. This accomplishes a lot. It encourages people to improve their riding ability.

One of the things seen across the board by all the judges is that we are breeding good horses in the United States. We have horses that can really do the tests, horses that have the conformation for the dressage and do the movements quite well, but often the riders' abilities are not being developed to be able to bring out the best in the horses.

We see a lot of horses that are talented – or not so talented – but who are not getting as far as their talent would indicate they could get. We were seeing people buy really nice horses but then they don't show up in the ring anymore. So, we are trying, with this new co-efficient of three, to force riders to think about becoming both better riders and better athletes.

Can you give me an example of how this will work?

For example, we are allowing people to use the double bridle at 3rd level. By giving a co-efficient of three, if a person cannot handle the double bridle correctly they'll get a lower score that, mathematically, is going to hurt the final score. You shouldn't be using the double bridle unless you know how to use it correctly. So, we hope to ask as much of the riders as we're asking of the horses. In the past, we've been generous with the rider's scores but overall we think we've been too diplomatic. In the long run, we've hurt the horse by scoring this way. So if you're riding well, you're going to be rewarded well.

You've been a judge for many years and you are a very successful competitor, as well. What do you think is a judge's main job?

The most important job we have as judges is to let people know in an honest way how well they are training their horse and how their riding is communicating instruction to the horse. Through that, we will protect the horse. Very often we see people blaming the horse when, sitting objectively at C, it's not the horse's fault. We can see the horse trying to understand the rider but there are too many conflicting aids being given.

I've heard it said that horses shouldn't have to do the piaffe. They hate the piaffe.

I think horses might hate the way the piaffe has been represented. It's in the teaching method.

In addition to the co-efficient for riders, are there any other big changes?

The other big change is the pirouette and the preparation for the pirouette. It used to be that you'd be riding on the rail and come up C and do a collected canter and then do a quarter pirouette and go into a halfpass. That's been taken out. It was an awkward spot to do it and it was too demanding for a 4th level horse. So we've taken out the real pirouette and replaced it with a working pirouette in 4th 2. In 4,1 on a circle you do five or six strides of very collected canter before the quarter line which is the preparation for the pirouette. In 4,2 there is working, and in 4, 3 there's a half pirouette.

I don't understand. What's a working pirouette?

If you think of the difference between a turn on the haunches and pirouette at the walk, in a turn on the haunches you make a bigger circle. In a working pirouette, what they're saying is that "between x and v develop a very collected canter, do a half-pirouette right at approximately five meters diameter." On the other hand, if a horse can do a real pirouette at that level, that's perfectly acceptable and will score higher if it is a good quality.

So if the rider tries to do a real one but the horse doesn't perform it, that affects the rider's score?

Yes, because the rider has the option.

All the people who've put thought into making the tests – the trainers, judges, riders – have the goal of trying to lead the riders towards the best way to train the horse and bring it along through the levels. For example, in the pirouette, first you teach a horse to do very collected canter, almost on the spot, and that canter you also teach progressively. Then when the horse can do the collected canter you teach the working pirouette where you allow the horse to make a small circle rather than on the spot. The horse has to develop the balance and muscle to do this. That's the philosophy under which the tests were written – give people an outline of development and training.

Do you expect this clinic to be instructive for all levels of riders?

The clinic is designed for all riders. I will show people through the demonstration riders how they can improve their score. The lower level riders will have the chance to see what their ultimate goal looks like. If a rider or trainer doesn't see upper level riding, they have a much harder time knowing what they are doing as they train and why they are doing it. The whole system is like a house – you start at the foundation and build up. There is a Pyramid of Training and the tests are developed on that principal.

People are always interested in what are the new movements, and what changes and so forth. When I was coming up through the ranks, I would always go to one of these clinics that shows the new tests ridden because I wanted to see how the presenters looked at the changes. Each person has their own ideas, as well as the basic ones which come out of the tests themselves.

You're based in Michigan. You are giving this clinic to Michigan riders. What do you see as their greatest needs?

I think Michigan riders, whether they're training level or Grand Prix riders, have a lot of opportunity as far as showing. I would like to see more trainers and upper level riders go to more clinics and certifications. The USDF workshops, for example, would be very beneficial for helping our instructors become more logical in their thinking, become better riders and improve their practical horse management skills. These workshops offer training in theory, in correct methods and in establishing a correct and logical order of teaching things. It begins in the stable, knowing about the horse. In my area, I don't believe that a lot of dressage trainers know enough about horse anatomy. This leads to over-training horses or teaching things to horses at the wrong time in their physical development.

I believe that other disciplines are moving more towards certification. Denny Emerson in eventing and George Morris in hunter jumper, for example, have been encouraging it.

I also think that you learn by seeing. Michigan people should go to Florida, California, Europe and just watch. This watching is very important. Also, they need to learn theory. They need to know more than just riding movements.

You are really passionate about this, about this need for trainers and teachers to know their stuff.

Being an FEI judge has allowed me to be in the company of really well educated trainers and teachers. People from other cultures and countries, people who speak several languages. But you have to go out and find these people, make the effort to put yourself into educational environments where people know more than you or where people bring new ideas to supplement your own. If you're going to hang your shingle out and collect money for being an instructor, it's only ethical that you educate yourself. People and horses are depending on you.

Ultimately, the most important thing is the welfare of the horse. This is the human's responsibility, to be educated so as not to make mistakes with the horse. The leaders in our organizations especially need to keep abreast of new developments. They are examples and should set high standards of education through example. If you look around the areas of our country that have strong educational programs have strong leadership.

Maryal, I've been taking lessons from you off and on for 25 years. I find the lessons just as refreshing and helpful now as I did when I first came to you. What sort of time do you have for teaching these days?

I have completely booked my weekends this year. For example, I will often be judging. I have regular riding clinics that I teach monthly around the country. I'm involved in the USDF L Judges Training program and the USDF Instructor Certification Training program. Michigan is my state and I want to be focused here as well so I give clinics in Michigan such as this one on the new tests. Year round, I give lessons on Tuesdays and Wednesdays at different barns within driving distance of my Lansing base. And I have my own reg