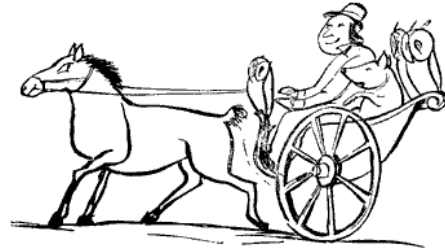


A Layman's Guide to Competitive Carriage Driving



Dressage—Day One

Let's take the mystery and boredom out of dressage with just a quick question.

Could you get the 5 year old child of your choice to walk/skip/run a straight line and stop exactly when and where you specified?

Take away all the fancy clothes, the element of the Spanish Riding School and the alphabet letters that aren't in order and what remains is Dressage. It is a "test"—certainly the aforementioned scenario would be a test—of skills, of wills, of patience. And again, the analogy continues to apply. And although the horse appears to be perfectly behaved, those of us who have been holding the reins can tell many stories to the contrary.

There are many Dressage tests and they have varying degrees of difficulty. A person enters a competition at their current level of expertise, s/he finds out which test has been chosen for the competition and then the homework begins. The rider/driver memorizes the order of the movements and then practices with their equine to make the test look as seamless, accurate and easy as possible.

Dressage is first in these 3 phase competitions because it demonstrates that the rider/driver and the equine are a team and are capable of the trials and tasks that will be asked of them in the subsequent events. The test measures the current levels of obedience, fitness, agility, education and discipline possessed by the human/equine team.

Does a high ACT score insure a successful college education? Does a great dressage test "foretell" who will win the overall competition? No, we only get a taste of what MAY happen.

Dressage just got a lot more interesting.

The Cross Country Marathon—Day Two

On the second day all of the "foo-foo" of Dressage is gone. The fancy Kentucky Derby Fascinator type hats get tucked into the hat boxes. The benningtons, gigs and meadowbrooks are gone. It's all business as helmets, protective vests and the built-to-take-a-beating marathon carriages take center stage.

The cross country or marathon is comprised of two parts; the distance (approximately 5K) and the obstacles. The obstacles used to be called "hazards" but this was seen as negative so "obstacles" is the more up-to-date term. An obstacle is a type maze or labyrinth. The obstacles are placed intermittently over the distance of the course. Within the obstacle there are gates that are marked "A", "B", "C", "D"

and “E.” A driver must enter at the In Gate, wind through the lettered gates in the correct order and then exit at the Out Gate. Going through “B” before going through “A” can result in Elimination. Also, as in Cones, the red “A” must be on the right or you are going through backwards. However, once you have gone through a gate it becomes open and available—forwards, backwards, whatever—if it makes for an efficient route through the obstacle. It’s almost as if a ribbon is across the gate—once you’ve gone through it properly, it is available however and whenever you want.

As a competitor reaches the finish line, a veterinarian will begin assessing the condition of the horse. Temperature, respiration and pulse will be checked. Most equines will have rather high numbers at this point. The vet instructs the driver to cool the horse down, usually with ice water or cold water from a hose. The driver brings the horse back to the vet after 10 minutes and usually all is fine.

The Cones Course—Day Three

Picture one of those pocket rocket Border Collies buzzing through an agility course and you will be in the right frame of mind for the Cones Course.

But then, oh dear! There’s carriage attached to the pocket rocket with a human on board!

The course is made up of 20 sets of cones, each with a tennis ball balanced on top. The course must be done in the specified numerical order. Fastest time, fewest balls down determines the winner.

The Cones Course is about math, agility, and memory.

The math in question is geometry and the shape of your arcs as you choose whether turning right or left will render a smoother route and then potentially the fastest time. Maybe your pony can cut and dig to one direction better than the other or maybe he will get sloppy and go wide, not only toppling the ball but completely creaming the cone.

The sets of cones are also called gates and they are numbered. The red number must be on the right; the white number is on the left. Reverse it and you have gone through backwards! Oh and don’t miss a gate! And before my memory completely fails—don’t forget to cross the Finish Line!