

Western Dressage, Spreading Good Riding

By Danica Yates

Good riding is good riding, regardless of what saddle you use. Everyone can benefit from dressage. This is a central message of the blossoming sport of Western Dressage. Learning to ride with classical dressage principles can improve the rhythm, relaxation, connection, impulsion, straightness and connection of any breed for any discipline. Western dressage is an exciting new discipline that melds western type horses and western tack with classical dressage principles. Further, it serves as the conduit to open the vast history of dressage principles and techniques to riders of all disciplines.

The regular sport of dressage is becoming more competitive each year with the increasing high quality of horses being bred. To be competitive at USDF shows or even many schooling shows, it takes a pretty darn high quality horse these days. These horses are bred to be more and more naturally uphill with powerful hind ends, free shoulders with great suspension and generally cost 20K and upwards. While training this type of horse is lots of fun and hugely rewarding when done well, not everyone has the time and money to put into such a project. Further, there can be physical limitations when many amateur dressage riders get 'over horsed,' buying animals that are too hot, athletic, large to comfortably ride. Expressive gaits are beautiful to watch but take more ability to ride. Horses that are big movers require a strong core to sit and a very independent hand to stay connected. When horses with big elastic movement spook or buck, it's no little thing!

While these aspects of dressage can be limiting and intimidating for riders from other disciplines or backyard type dressage riders, there is a vast pool of beautiful horse training knowledge that goes back thousands of years in the world of classical dressage. Ancient knowledge of how to communicate with your horse and teach him to dance fluidly with his rider can be shared through principles of classical dressage. These principles are not limited by any means to horses with big movement and can be applied to any breed of horse with any type of movement. Classical training will enhance the freedom of movement and elegance of any horse.

'Western dressage' as a new discipline has hit the horse scene in recent years, and has taken off in the last year with the development of two associations: the North American Western Dressage Association and Western Dressage Association of America. These organizations have developed sets of rules and dressage tests to shape the emerging sport. Western dressage deemphasizes the value of inbred huge gaits, and following the trend of

USDF, looks more at the rider's influence and the partnership between horse and rider. The upshot is, western dressage makes the principles of classical dressage more accessible to the average rider on the average horse as well as horses and riders from various disciplines. You don't need a fancy warmblood to make an appearance in a western dressage test. You can take any horse and learn to ride him with better connection and harmony.



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Riders from a broad range of disciplines are encouraged to get into Western dressage. Barrel racers, ropers, gamers, hunter/jumpers etc. have always known that dressage can help them improve the quality of their performances but there has been little structure to help facilitate it. It can be difficult to find good dressage training. A stereotype exists that dressage horses are strong in the bridle and stiff or tense. Quite true that there is bad dressage training out there, just as there is harmful training in any discipline. Horses trained with good classical dressage methods however, are soft and supple. Good dressage teaches a horse to use his body properly and prologs his soundness and longevity. Western dressage seeks to take good training methods and make them readily available to riders of any discipline to improve their training. The barrel horse or roping horse who is taught to move over his topline and have his tie down taken off, or the jumper horse who lengthens and collects his step with good engagement to rate better on course will invariably get faster times. The western pleasure horse that is taught to move forward from this hind end will invariably be sounder for longer.

Western dressage applies the training pyramid used by USDF and the FEI to help guide riders towards better riding. The training pyramid is an outline for principles of dressage training. What lies at the heart of dressage training, is quality of the gaits. For western dressage, these gaits need not be extravagant, but must be correct and show good self carriage and connection with the rider.

Western dressage horses are expected to be ridden into a light contact so that they are not in a head set or behind the leg. They must show suppleness over their topline. Some of the western dressage tests ask for stretchy circles in both directions. Just as in classical dressage, training is not about the tricks but about quality of the connection and quality of the movement. The patterns and movements simply demonstrate good connection and proper use of the horse's body.



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Western dressage is an exciting new discipline that takes the quality training principles of classical dressage and makes them more accessible to riders and horses from a variety of backgrounds while embracing the American western riding traditions. Like classical dressage, the discipline is designed to improve partnership between horse and rider, and is building opportunities to show and get feedback on training as well.

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