

Lynn Palm reads the test to Marie-Frances Davis who rides the Appendix Quarter Horse Restless Lark. "You need to memorize the test," says Palm, "but to build confidence, you can have someone call it out to you during your ride."

Special thanks to Lyn Morgan, owner of The Surrey in Potomac, Maryland, for the riding clothes used in this series. Contact The Surrey at (301) 299-8225.

Improve Your Accuracy

In Part 4, Lynn Palm takes you through a practice test at home.

By Lynn Palm with Patricia Lasko • Photos by Sharon P. Fibelkorn



If you're like me, you love dressage because it's the basis of all good riding for any discipline. I teach many riders who, despite their fears, have dreams of being able to take their horses to a dressage show one day. I know how intimidating this can be, but take heart. In this five-part series, I'm going to help you prepare for one of the most basic dressage tests at a show, Training Level, Test 1. This month, my student, Marie-Frances Davis, demonstrates on the 14-year-old Appendix-registered Quarter Horse Restless Lark (by Rugged Lark out of a Thoroughbred mare). He is owned by Marjorie Sutton of Corona Del Mar,

California. I love Quarter Horses because of their quiet temperaments and forgiving natures but, of course, you can follow this program on any horse. Our long-term goal is the same as the "Purpose" of the U.S. Equestrian Federation's (USEF) Training Level, Test 1: "To confirm that the horse's muscles are supple and loose, and that it moves freely forward in a clear and steady rhythm, accepting contact with the bit." This is the beginning of dressage training for any horse.

I teach students from all disciplines, and I always have them ride a dressage test. They really love it once they give it a try. They find riding in a dressage arena challenging, and they enjoy using the letters to help them ride with precision. When they get to the point where the horse is responding to their aids right at the markers, it is a big reward. They are actually harmonizing with the horse, and that is what good riding is all about. This accuracy and precision helps to build the control of the horse (responding well to the aids) that we all want to achieve. And, when you've got that, it's fun, rewarding and you have all the confidence in the world. You never want to quit!

In my February article, we worked on ways to improve your position and balance. In March, you learned how to make smooth transitions, and in April we helped improve the horse's balance through bending and straightness exercises. This month, we're going to go through each movement in the test so you can see the patterns you need to ride.

Before you ride the test, you need to memorize it. You can walk through it on the ground or draw it on paper. During the actual test at the show, you can have someone stand at B or E and call the test as you ride each movement. Sometimes this can give the rider confidence. When I started competing My Royal Lark last year, I concentrated so much on what I needed to do for my horse, I found that it was easier for me to have someone read, so I didn't have to worry about what came next. After four or five shows, I did it alone.

We'll talk more about your warm-up routine in my final article next month when we go to a show. For now, let's look at the test. It's divided into 13 sections, and you receive a score for each one. I'm going to break the test down into the 13 parts, and we're going to ride each one during our practice test. (Follow the diagrams for each movement. Horses are not drawn to scale.)

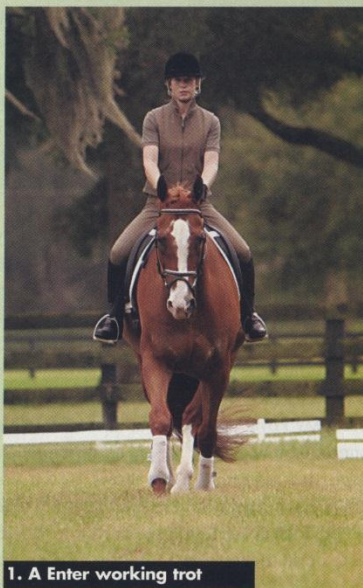
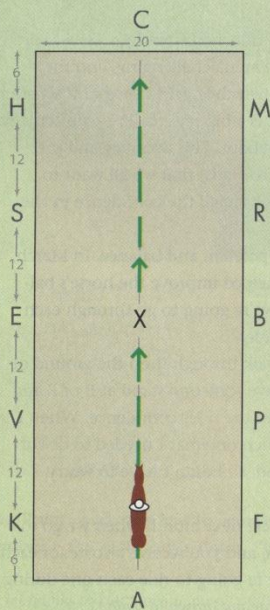
1. A Enter working trot. X Halt, Salute. Proceed working trot

Outside the arena, circle your horse in rising or sitting trot in his best direction. Turn down the centerline and look ahead to C, which will help you accurately ride down the centerline.

Your peripheral vision works 180 degrees, so when you're on the centerline, use it to be aware of E and B. Transition from trot to walk to halt, using your seat aid, keeping both legs on the horse and closing your fingers. Make sure you keep the horse's body straight and aligned on the centerline. When you can't see E and B anymore in your periphery, you are at X. You want your horse's shoulder on top of X. Also, you want a square halt, meaning the horse's front and hind legs are under his body and evenly spaced—a sign he is balanced. If you can keep your horse straight on the centerline as you halt, he will probably halt square. Usually when the legs aren't square, the horse is crooked somewhere.

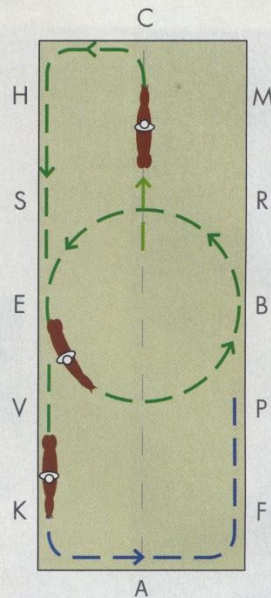
When you feel the horse is settled in the halt, make your salute: Put both reins in your left hand. Move your right hand (with your fingers pointed down) to your side behind your right thigh. At the same time, nod your head down and up. A man removes his hat before lowering his arm and nodding. After you nod, the judge nods back. It is important to make eye contact. To me, that shows the rider is confident. The horse feels your confidence, too.

Now pick up the right rein, and you are ready to move on to your next maneuver. For the upward transition to the working trot, use your seat first, then be sure to use a light leg aid to have smoothness in your transition. Get him moving forward and straight by keeping your rein contact against your horse's neck on both sides to assure the quality of straightness down the centerline. Prepare for tracking to the left at C by flexing your horse's head to the left before you get to C.



1. A Enter working trot

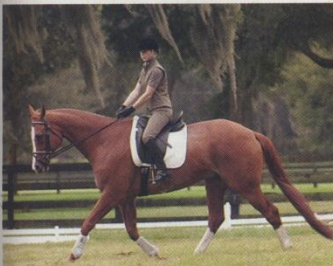
2. C Track left, E Circle left 20 meters
3. Between K & A working canter left



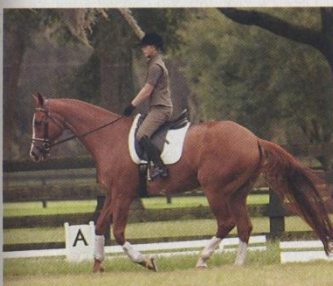
Riding your first corners well is important because it puts your horse on the aids and gives the judge a good first impression. When you track left at C, bend your horse to the left—use your inside leg to ask for the bend and support him with your outside rein and leg. Many riders have a tendency to tilt forward or to the inside in corners, so keep your shoulders back. This will help you balance better and keep you over the horse's center of gravity.

Now you're going down the long side, preparing to circle left at E. Remember it's your responsibility as the rider to keep a steady rhythm throughout your test. That is a basic requirement for correct training and a good score.

Your circle will be less overwhelming if you train your eye to look toward one quarter at a time. (See last month's issue for how to deal with falling in and falling out on a circle.) Riding an accurate 20-meter circle shows you are balanced and straight on the curve. It also allows you to



2. E Circle 20 meters



3. Between K and A working canter

easily regulate a consistent rhythm. This is essential for your best score. (A tip to riding accurately is to first walk the circle in the dressage arena on foot so you can educate your eye and ride it better.) Notice that to make an accurate 20-meter circle, you will track two meters (about six feet) inside the lines between S-R and V-P.

As you finish the circle, go straight toward K. Use your inside leg to keep the horse on the track and your outside rein to straighten him. Use your leg and rein aids equally and continue straight ahead. When you get to V, begin positioning your aids for canter so that when you reach K, you are ready to bend him around the corner and ask for canter. Use your seat and your right leg for the left-lead canter depart. The most common mistake for the horse is to fall in when the rider asks for the canter. As you initiate a balanced transition, provide solid support with your inside, bending leg aid and contact with your inside, indirect rein.

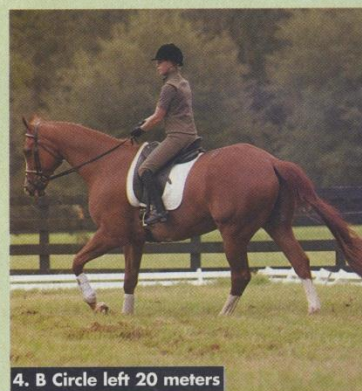
4. B Circle left 20 meters

5. Between centerline & B working trot

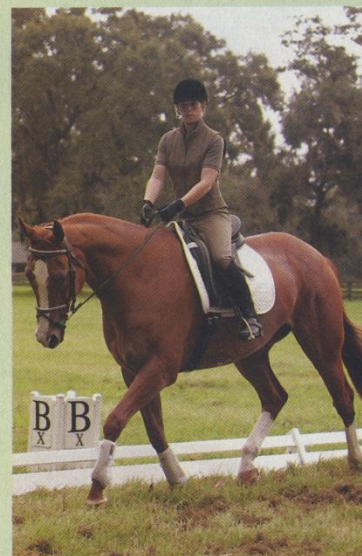
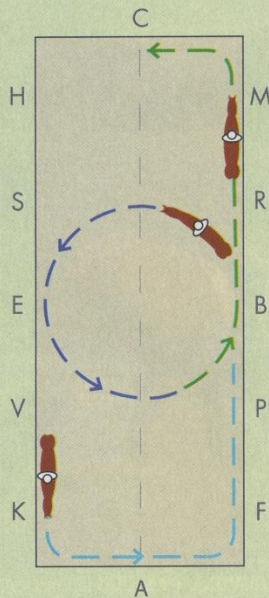
As you canter past A and reach F, straighten your horse. Don't be too slow. The horse needs to have a forward bounce to the canter to encourage an uphill balance on that straight line. (This is usually necessary with Quarter Horses who have a tendency to be on the forehand.) To aid this uphill balance, use your seat to encourage the horse to move forward from the leg aids. If you lift your fingers just a little bit, it will encourage his forehead to stay up and light so he can keep engaging from behind. If the rider were to just let go, the horse would flatten his body, lose rhythm and get too much on the forehand. He would quicken his stride or break his gait. Once you lose your balance in rhythm, you lose the quality of the canter. As you circle, think about your uphill balance, forward motion and spring in the canter. Let the horse cover ground and show energy.

When you come to B, remind yourself that you are only riding three-quarters of a circle because it is easy to canter too far.

As you reach the centerline, begin a downward transition to trot either rising or sitting. (It is easier to stay in balance at the rising trot for this transition.) You want to be at the working trot before you get to B. Go straight to M, and make sure you have the correct bend through the next corner. You're going to transition down to walk at C.



4. B Circle left 20 meters



5. Between centerline and B working trot

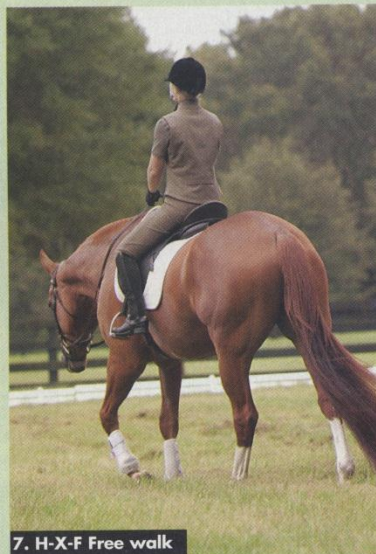
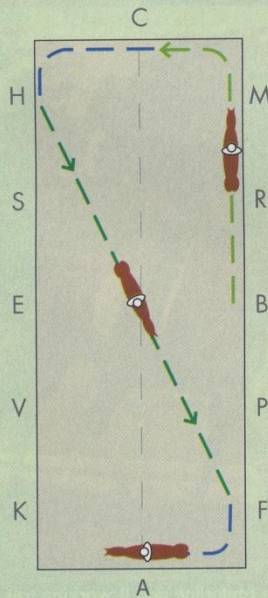
6. C Medium walk; C-H medium walk

7. H-X-F Free walk; F-A medium walk

To transition to the medium walk at C, sit tall, tighten your stomach, stop your hips from moving in the trot rhythm, keep your legs in contact with the horse's sides and close your fingers. Read the test "Directives" written next to every movement. They explain what the judge wants to see. For the walk, it says: "Medium walk: a clear, regular and unconstrained walk of moderate lengthening. The horse remains on the bit, walks energetically but calmly with even and determined steps." I like the word "determined." The horse is marching with his hind hooves touching the ground in front of the prints of the fore hooves, which means the horse is reaching forward. "And the rider maintains a light, soft and steady contact with the mouth."

Go through the corner and turn across the diagonal at H. Loosen your reins but keep your seat moving and your legs in contact, because your legs keep your horse straight. The Directives say: "The free walk is a pace of relaxation in which the horse is allowed complete freedom to lower and stretch out his head and neck." The quality of the free walk can be lost if the horse is either too relaxed, tense or loses concentration in the free walk. If he doesn't stretch down, you need forward motion through the seat and legs to keep him moving from behind. This will encourage him to stretch long and low. (When you're schooling at home, practice the free walk frequently after trot and canter work, as you get double points for this on your test at the show.)

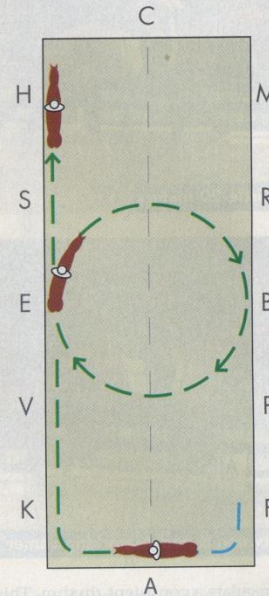
Re-establish contact as you approach F. Adjust the reins slowly and softly for a smooth transition to medium walk. If you take up the reins quickly without using the driving aids, you're going to see some reaction in the horse's head and mouth—keep him going forward. When you are at F, look at A and prepare for the trot. Make sure you have your horse properly bent to the right and working deep in that corner.



7. H-X-F Free walk

8. A Working trot

9. E Circle right 20 meters



Now you're going to do the same movements in the other direction. Both the horse and rider are always going to have easier sides and more difficult sides. If you are right-handed, more than likely, your right side is going to be stronger and more coordinated than the left. You have to do exercises for your left side that even out your body, and it is the same with the horse. He often has an easier side, which is soft and supple, and a stiff side, which is more tight and tense. You always work the difficult side more than the easier side so you can get both sides of his body compatibly even.

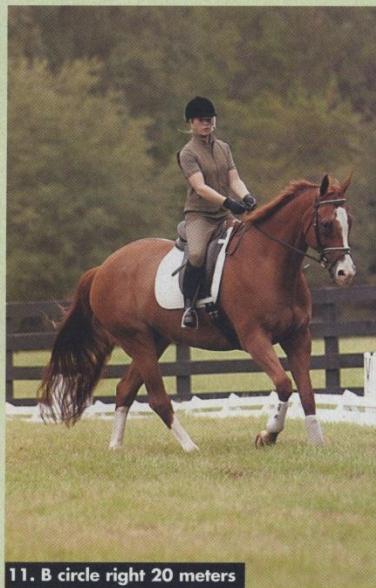
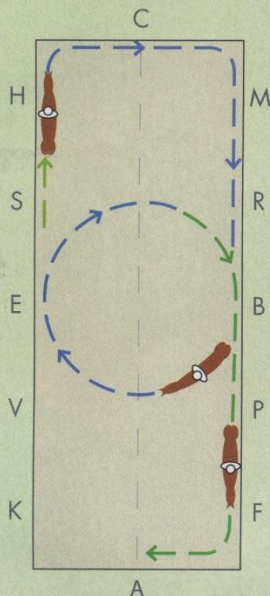
After you pick up the trot at A, if you have a correct bend through the next corner, more than likely, you are going to have a good 20-meter circle at E. Finish the circle and go straight.

10. Between H & C working canter right lead

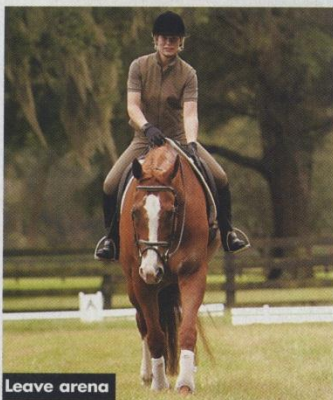
11. B Circle right 20 meters

12. Between centerline & B working trot

Be accurate, and make sure you have the proper bend, because you are right by the judge again. She can see this canter depart closely and can tell if your horse is balanced and in alignment. If he's properly bent, the horse will be better balanced, and you will have a responsive and smooth transition. It's desirable to have your canter transition in the corner—right in the middle of that curve. Ride the circle to the right the same way you did to the left. Between the centerline and B, transition down to working trot.



11. B circle right 20 meters



Leave arena

**13. A Down centerline;
X Halt, Salute**

Trot past B down the next long side. At F, turn your head to look down the centerline. When you get in the corner, look at C, which will draw you down the centerline (if you look at A, you'll overshoot the centerline). During this turn, keep your shoulders back, as this will be one of the tightest turns you'll do in the test.

As you approach X, transition down to walk for a couple of beats and then halt. If the halt is not square, walk a step forward, never back. Salute. After the judge salutes, loosen the reins and leave the

arena at a free walk. Walk toward C and give the judge a verbal "thank you."

Your homework this month is to practice different sections of the test until you feel comfortable with each turn, transition and figure. Training Level, Test 1 is not a strenuous test, and if your horse learns it and starts to anticipate, I think that's OK. I always use anticipation as a positive, not a negative, because the horse is trying to please you. So you just have to be lighter with your aids and be ahead of him. Always practice with a positive attitude, trying to improve, and your horse will love it. Re-read my previous articles on position, use of the aids, establishing balance and making smooth transitions. Next month, I'll take you with me to a show and explain the show-day routine. 📷

Lynn Palm began her equestrian career as a dressage rider, and dressage has been the basis of her training, no matter the discipline. As a member of the American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA), she won a record four SuperHorse titles and more than 34 World and Reserve World Championships. She has performed more than 50 brideless dressage exhibitions to music throughout the United States including at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta with her AQHA partner Rugged Lark. She currently spearheads the drive to add dressage to the AQHA list of disciplines. She gives clinics worldwide and is a regular commentator on RFD-TV and Horse TV. She and her husband, Cyril Pittion-Rossillion—a Riding Master from the French national equestrian school—give clinics year round at their farms in Michigan and Florida. The Web site is lynnpalm.com.

To learn more about riding a dressage test, read "Create Balance & Control at Show Time" by Jan Ebeling with Beth Baumert from the April 2005 issue of *Dressage Today*. For back issues, call (301) 977-3900 and press 0 for the receptionist.