

TEST PREP

Apply SAT strategies to your next dressage test.

By Hilary Moore

During my time as an FEI Young Rider, I spent several years tutoring students for standardized testing. I taught simple, but effective, techniques that raised students' scores and made them more confident during testing. As a dressage competitor and trainer, I often call upon these same proven techniques to prepare for the show ring. Both the SAT and dressage competitions test one's ability with a standardized scoring system and require participants to be as prepared as possible to demonstrate the scope of their abilities within a small window of time. The keys to success include knowing the test, avoiding common mistakes, practicing the test and planning for show day.

Preparedness means more than learning how to ride dressage in lessons and practicing these skills at schooling shows. A truly competitive test taker has a plan of attack that is purposefully designed and executed. The first step to being prepared is **knowing your test**:

- Review and run through your test to practice and confirm movements.

- Draw the test movements on paper, so you know what each should look like, including the exact geometry of the arena. You need to know exactly where your figures hit at each point.
- Ride through your test enough that you know what common mistakes you and your horse make, so you can learn to avoid them on show day.
- Practice picking up the test somewhere in the middle, so you are comfortable with finishing it, even if you go off course or forget what you have already ridden.
- Know the movements that have a coefficient of two—they count double—so you can handle a problem with the lowest effect on your score.

For example, in Second Level, Test 3, you ride a simple change between H and S, then counter canter from S to E and change rein from E to F. The first movement, the simple change, is scored with a coefficient of one. The counter canter and change of rein carries a coefficient of two. A prepared rider knows it is important to finish the simple change and pick up the counter canter by S. A late change will affect the score of the first movement as well as the second. Also, getting the simple change as soon as possible after H gives you time to pick up a correct counter canter before S.

Knowing your test means understanding the questions being asked of you and your horse. To do this, try going beyond your lessons by reading magazines and books, such as Max Gahwyler's series called *The Competitive Edge*. He gives this tip on preparing for movements: "The correct preparation for lengthening in a test situation actually starts on the opposite long side using whatever movement is requested,

such as a circle, shoulder-in or simply a shoulder-fore position, to enhance the engagement of the inside hindquarters. The corner should be used to increase the engagement." *The View from C* by Dr. Dietmar Specht is also useful in understanding the basics required for every movement in a test.

Bring what you have learned from books to your next riding lesson. If you have a great instructor, he or she will love to hear about what you've read, answer questions and help you effectively incorporate it into your program.

Avoid common mistakes. Another trick I always gave my standardized testing students was to think of the test from the perspective of those who wrote it. SAT test writers are not out to ruin people's lives, and the same holds true for dressage test writers. Both offer questions and reward correct answers. In SAT tests, a set of common mistakes is built in so fewer students achieve perfect scores unless they are paying attention.

In teaching dressage movements to horses and riders, I have found that each level has mistakes we can all make. For example, it is common to incorrectly continue lateral movements into the corner without straightening beforehand. By watching a test ridden properly, talking with your trainer and noting the Directive ideas listed on your test sheet, you can find the mistakes riders typically made in your test and avoid them.

Practice your test. Once you are comfortable, practice riding through the entire test in front of a dressage trainer and/or a schooling show judge. Putting it all together without stopping allows you to become familiar with the feel of a whole test and find ways to cope if things are not going well. Practice your test in a regulation arena, at different times of day, in varying weather conditions and with diverse distractions. Any test taker benefits from knowing how they perform on a test, especially when under pressure.

Terr Miller



Review your performance with your instructor to identify what you are good at and what you must focus on to get it 110 percent right.

Plan your warm-up. Now is the time to practice your warm-up. Decide what are the most productive exercises and how much time you will need. Then create confidence by making a structured checklist that shows you how much time you will need to get ready.

Plan for show day. Once your entries are sent, you have plenty of time to plan. Identify what you need to pack for you and your horse, decide how you will get to the big event and who will go with you. Write down what your day's schedule will look like. Procrastination and unpreparedness create unneeded stress. Everyone benefits from taking the time to print directions, a packing list and a ride schedule. When planning your schedule, allow yourself enough time to take a mental break before you get your horse and yourself ready. Now you should be confident and comfortable with your warm-up routine and detailed checklist to focus on.

Remember, however, that unexpected things almost always happen in a testing situation. Tests wait for no one. Allow yourself plenty of time for the unexpected, and assume something will go wrong. The more prepared you are for minor setbacks, the less stress you will bring into your performance.

I always told my SAT students to bring a pencil for the one that breaks and another to replace that one. Pack a copy of your horse's Coggins, membership cards, a medical kit, rain gear and other items you often see carried by seasoned competitors.

Get a good night's sleep. I cannot tell you how many prepared high school students received unusually low scores on their SATs because of lack of sleep. To help prepare for an earlier bedtime, I told my night owl students to begin

a full week before the big day. While it might be hard to get a full eight hours when you are all nerves, the new schedule should help you get a few more hours of sleep.

Nutrition plan. Incorporate healthy eating into your newly revised routine. It seems simple enough, but, when we wake up early for our big day, it's easy to skip breakfast. By the time noon rolls around, many people in a testing situation have not eaten or had water in at least 12 hours. You must eat and drink frequently, even if it's small amounts.

Pay attention to the foods you eat before riding. Avoid anything spicy and greasy. Without proper food and water, our bodies can't function normally. If you're having trouble with a transition or are wondering why your leg is cramping, you might just be tired and hungry.

Finally, remember to relax. Even if you do not feel nervous, there is a chance you might be. After taking the SAT exam countless times for work, I still felt nervous. Likewise, I do not know a seasoned competitor who does not have show nerves on occasion. The more you recognize your nervousness, the more you can own it and calm yourself down. Identify what your body does when you are nervous, and work on techniques to counteract these reactions. For example, if you tend to tighten your muscles, remember to flex and then relax them. If you tend to lose focus, give yourself a list of clear tasks to complete to get you back on track.

Remember that unlike the SATs, dressage shows are supposed to be fun. With good preparation, you should feel confident that you and your horse are ready to do your best. 🐾

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