

UPDATE OF HRCAV DRESSAGE TESTS, 2020

Although there have been very few competitions since early this year, you may have noticed that there are new dressage tests on the HRCAV website, to take effect from 1 September 2020. The 2013 tests will no longer be valid for official competitions from that date.

Since HRCAV tests were last totally revised in 2013, ongoing changes have been made following the identification of problems and many suggestions for improvements, from both judges and competitors. However no comprehensive examination of the tests had been undertaken. At the same time, many changes were also occurring in the dressage “industry” overseas and in Australia, with horse welfare and horse and rider safety being amongst the most important concerns. Thus the Dressage Sub Committee undertook in 2019 a complete review of the much revised 2013 tests, and proposed to the HRCAV Executive that some significant changes should be made.

In 2019 EA introduced new tests, consistent with Federation Equestrienne International (FEI) guidelines and developments. There is a great deal of research and expert input available to the FEI from which we can also benefit. While the significant difference between EA and HRCAV is acknowledged, it would not in our organisation’s best interests to stray too far from the directions being taken here and overseas.

We already ensure that our saddlery and gear requirements are consistent with EA, as the resources they and FEI have to research products and their effect on horses are much greater than ours.

Of course there is no direct correlation between EA levels and ours, because of the lower starting point of our membership base. However we have increasingly sought a degree of parity at our higher levels, in the knowledge that many HRCAV members now choose to join and compete with EA as well as their HRCAV club/s.

Therefore it is in all our interests to be aware of developments in EA, and to the extent that it is consistent with our own objectives and ethos, to be consistent with their practices. This is already reflected in our higher level tests being consistent with EA: Level 2 tests with Novice Level, Level 1 with Elementary and Advanced Level with Medium. Thus In reviewing the 2013 tests, the DSC was mindful of (amongst a great many other factors) the recent changes to EA tests (in particular the relaxation of the requirement for sitting trot).

The most significant change is to reduce tests to 4 at each level.

There is widespread agreement that we do not need 6 tests. EA has only 3 per level, and there is no anecdotal evidence that our event organising committees find a need for such a wide choice. Furthermore it puts unnecessary pressure on riders to learn 6 tests, even over a period of time, as they are unlikely to remember them all and are more likely to become confused between them.

The following tests have been deleted:

Some of the 2013 tests have been retained, although with some changes.

Point 6 tests for levels 5, 4, 3 and 1. These tests were originally designed to provide a taste of the next level; however this is inconsistent with having Level requirements and expectations, and is not a fair test of how well the combination is doing at their assessed level. It also does nothing for the confidence of riders just started at the level and who in a jackpot situation may be faced with the point 6 test at their first outing at their new level.

The A6 is an exception to this, there being no next level to consider. Our Advanced tests are the equivalent of EA Medium level, and it seems reasonable that they should include the movements required at that level. There was no test other than A6 that included canter half pass or walk half pirouettes, both of which are Advanced Level Assessment requirements, and therefore need to be included in at least one test.

Level 2 is also an exception, due to the desire to keep 2 tests containing leg yield (further explanation below).

The additional test removed at each level is as follows:

Level 5 – 5.1

The need for a very basic first test is acknowledged. However even the lowest test should require the combination to show basic L5 requirements, being walk trot, canter and halt, riding straight lines, turns and 20m trot circles. There were no circles in 5.1, and the test was very short and boring. 5.2 provided a basic easy start to competitions while demonstrating the level requirements, and is now renumbered as the first test.

Level 4 – 4.2

Test 4.1 was a good basic test appropriate for the first at L4 and has been retained. Test 4.2 had a halt at X between E and B. This was quite a difficult movement at level 4, as there was nothing to provide guidance for straightness and also the judgement as to where X is when between those 2 markers was not easy (the halt in test 4.4 was at A, an easier movement). Test 4.2 also allowed the canter-trot transitions (movements 4 & 11) to be made somewhere between B & M and B & F, a distance of 24 metres. This made it difficult for the judge and did not encourage any development of accuracy.

Level 3 – 3.2

Both 3.1 and 3.2 required canter transitions between markers on a corner, which is appropriate in L4 but not to L3 where transitions should be within 1 stride of a marker. They also asked for halt from a walk movement, which again is very basic – after all they are expected to halt from trot at the start and end of the test. On the basis that we should start with a reasonably simple test, it was determined that 3.1 remain and test 3.2 has been removed.

Level 2 – 2.2 and 2.3

As mentioned above, in level 2 we did not remove the 2.6 test, as to do so would leave only one test with the leg yield movement, which is seen as a useful training tool at Level 2. The 2.1 and 2.2 tests were quite similar in degree of difficulty, so either could have been removed and the 2.1 has been retained. The 2.3 test had an awkward movement requiring a half circle

in trot and transition to canter over the centreline, which judges had reported as problematic, hence that was the extra test to be removed.

Level 1 – 1.3

This test included leg yields which are used in L2 as a precursor to classical lateral movements of shoulder in and travers. Once these are introduced it is unnecessary to continue with leg yield which is really a training aid and not part of EA Elementary tests which are the equivalent of Level 1 tests. The test also required a walk/canter depart straight into a 10m circle, a movement with quite a high level of difficulty. Test 1.4 also required this, whereas 1.5 did not, but 1.5 included travers while 1.4 did not, so there was not much to separate them, and both have been retained.

Advanced – A1 & A2

As noted above the A6 test remains. The tests removed are A1 and A2, both of which included counter canter half circles. In EA Medium counter canter is a movement incidental to the requirement for a flying change, not a movement tested in its own right. 20m counter canter half circles are challenging movements and should not be included at the beginning of the Advanced tests. Furthermore these tests also require half pass movements from the centreline, in the case of A1 from L and I, the placement of which made it difficult for judges at C to assess their accuracy.

Additional amendments

Sitting trot versus Rising trot (or optional) – EA has made changes to tests at Novice and Elementary level to allow more trot movements to be optional, particularly those requiring lengthened strides or Medium trot. We agree, in the interests of horse welfare. Too often judges see riders who are not steady enough in their position attempting to sit trot, and horses suffering as a consequence. It should only be done when a rider is competent enough to ensure the horse is up in its back and able to carry the sitting rider, as well as steady enough in their hands to maintain a smooth contact with the horse's mouth. Therefore in all Level 1 tests, movements requiring lengthening in trot are now optional rising. At Level 2 and 3, tests may specify sitting in some movements, but not in those lengthening of stride, for which rising will be compulsory.

Lengthened strides (in trot) terminology – the descriptor for this movement has been inconsistent and confusing for judges and riders. We have made the requirement consistent, in Level 3 to “show some lengthened strides”, changing to “lengthen the strides” in Level 2, and “medium trot” and/or “extended trot” (marker to marker) in Level 1 and Advanced.

The proposal for the changes to the tests was developed by the Dressage Sub Committee (DSC) in the second half of 2019, and was endorsed at its meeting of 5th December 2019. In determining the changes, the DSC began with the premise that there should be 4 tests at each level, and that the tests to be removed would be those that were the least suitable.

In making the judgements at each level, the DSC took many factors into account, including the considerable feedback received since the introduction of the 2013 tests, the need for tests to show a graduated increase in difficulty within each level, the correlation between the

movements of the tests and the Level Requirements at each level, any issues causing difficulties to judges i.e. difficulty in seeing a part of a movement, the logical flow of the tests, relative timing, the need for consistency in terminology and any other considerations thought to be relevant.

Early on in the process the DSC had in mind to remove all point 6 tests, as there had been considerable criticism of some of these. However on analysis, the easiest solution proved not to be the best, with Level 2 and Advanced requiring exceptions to this course of action. So for all tests, the least satisfactory test was earmarked for removal, together with the point 6 tests for levels 5 to 3, and level 1. For Level 2 and Advanced, the second least suitable tests were marked for removal.

The DSC was confident that the final raft of changes would provide a fairer set of tests, with more consistency and better reflection of the level requirements, and commended the proposal to the Executive, which unanimously approved them in February 2020. The subsequent urgency of matters relating to COVID19 meant that action on the changes was not high on the agenda, but the decision reached in February followed due process, and hence is now in place.

The Executive and HRC AV members look forward to resumption of competition in the not too distant future, and are confident that members and officials will find the new tests a substantial improvement