

'T here was only one mark between first and second'.

'I only needed one more mark to gain over sixty % and that would have been an Olympic Qualification'.

How often do we look at the scoreboard and realise a few more marks and we could have won?

So it's back to reading articles about roundness and engagement, improving the frame, slow the trot down, activate the canter and so the lists of schooling objectives go on!

Wait ... Let's not get too bogged down about our horses schooling regime - after all it is only another mark or two that is required. Do not go changing the training, have a look at the overall picture.

The most important thing to remember in riding a dressage test is that it's not your parents, your friends or your trainer who you are trying to prove your prowess to - it's that judge at the C end of the arena, and it is your attention to that judge that is going to gain you marks.

Once you leave the warm up arena and enter the main arena your whole performance revolves around that judge's impression of your horse and you as a rider are able to influence this.

Of course nothing, but nothing, is going to outweigh correct schooling but remember what all we need to do is gain one more mark from that judge.

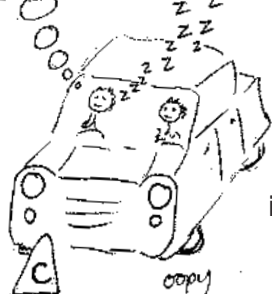
Was that a six or a seven? One simple movement. One mark. If you can make a judge say seven it could be you're off to the Olympics, if a six you stay home. And you'd better believe it,

judges often err whether to go up or down a mark.

A six no matter how big, is still only a six, but a seven, no matter how hesitant or small is still a seven, and that is all we maybe need to be Olympic bound.

There is a lot to be said for learning what judges

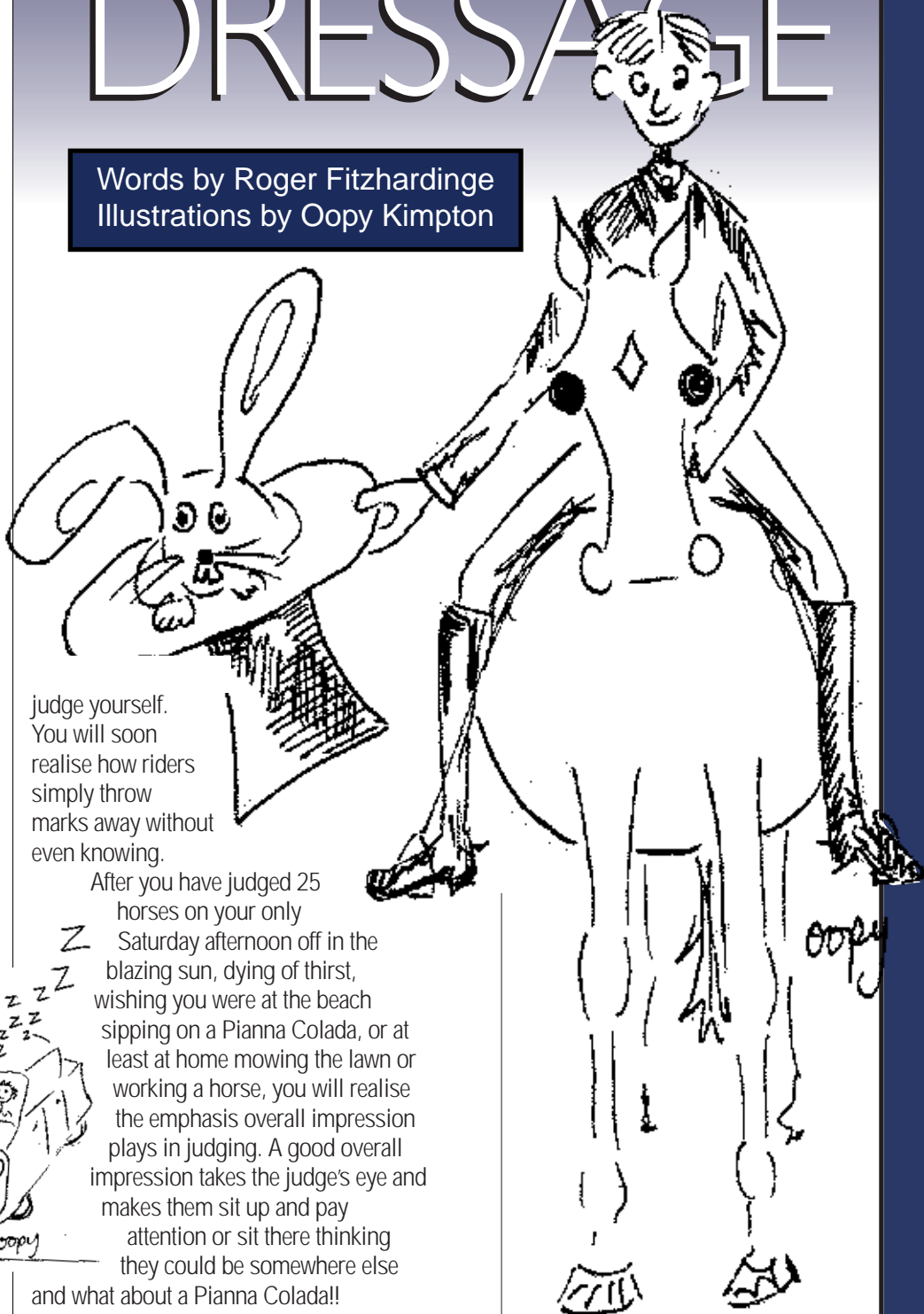
look for and what better way to do this than sit and be a



Improving your

DRESSAGE

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judge yourself. You will soon realise how riders simply throw marks away without even knowing.

After you have judged 25 horses on your only Saturday afternoon off in the blazing sun, dying of thirst, wishing you were at the beach sipping on a Pianna Colada, or at least at home mowing the lawn or working a horse, you will realise the emphasis overall impression plays in judging. A good overall impression takes the judge's eye and makes them sit up and pay attention or sit there thinking they could be somewhere else and what about a Pianna Colada!!

ATTENTION TO DETAIL.

The way you present the overall picture, the attention you deserve is firstly noted by the judge as you trot around the arena and their first impression is lasting. Your horse must be clean and extremely neatly presented. Often dressage riders have no appreciation of how a badly plaited mane not only looks scruffy but can also give a false impression of an outline. A plait in the wrong place can easily make the horse look broken necked or upside down.

Obviously it works in reverse, a well plaited mane not only looks great but can hide faults and enhance an outline.

Now that's only a tip on plaiting manes.

What about tails? White, odd shaped socks, crooked blazes? Horses with a high tail carriage? Whispy tail? Long backs? Short necks and the list goes on ...

that's a whole book, but it's easy to remedy.

Be honest about how your own horse looks and take a day off and go to a big show hack day. Observe how the hack riders cover up conformation problems and enhance the picture of their

horse - it will be time well spent. Observe things like the

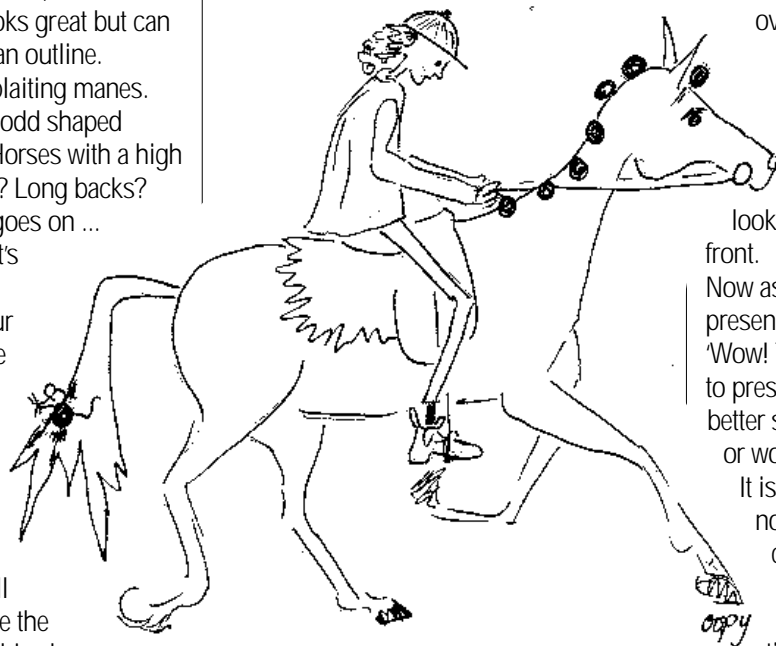
swing of the horses tail, this shows softness of the horse's back. Does a long tail look better than a short tail? Pulled, plaited or natural? Does the position of the saddle affect the look of the horse? Big saddle cloth or small? The saddle cloth placed in front of the saddle shortens the neck and gives the appearance of a loaded forehead. If the bottom line of the saddlecloth slopes up towards the rump it makes the horse look downhill. Well that is already nearly a book and all you wanted was a seven not a six! With a little more effort in our presentation we may affect the overall look of the horse and change the first impression a judge has of us.

From one day to the next I improved a horse's percentage by 5%. The first day comments of 'lacks engagement' changed in one day. No different work, didn't even ride her before the class, but I changed a high tail set into a low one - amazing -

same judge and 5% better marks and comments of good engagement.

Simply the lower tail carriage gave the appearance of being lower behind, shorter and better engaged. It is true that a judge really looks at the overall picture and gets a feel for the balance of the horse.

So what about the rider? Of course if you want good marks you have to be clean and appropriately dressed in accordance with the rules. The dress will vary from



one grade to the next so be aware of the requirements. Dressage is traditional and disciplined and the way you dress should be too.

Make certain your clothes fit well and are not garish. Remember - the rider's mark has a co-efficient. Ill fitting clothes can give a bad look to a good position. If your hat sits down in front it makes you appear hunched, if your coat is ill fitting - with more padding in one shoulder you will look crooked or if the seam down the back and vent are crooked or one stirrup is longer than the other or your hair hangs down and makes you look like you are going Hawaiian dancing and not doing dressage, then of course these things will not help you get good marks for your position.

Remember tack is to be clean. Not only does it look good but also makes the rider

feel better. Some things that are really no nos and give the appearance of the horse's head tilting even though it isn't are crooked browbands or nosebands. So make sure they are straight. You don't want anything gaudy, but elegant and traditional and in keeping with your horse and your character (and if you have brass it must be clean).

Market harbrough reins aren't a good look nor are martingale stoppers, especially on the snaffle rein of a double bridle - but

often seen - huge saddle cloths and overly fluffy sheepskin girth covers makes the horse look very deep in the girth and low to the ground - alias on the forehead - is also another consideration. The objective is to make the horse look lower behind and grow taller in front.

Now as you trot to the judge beautifully presented they have no option but to think 'Wow! This person goes to a lot of trouble to present themselves so well just for me. I better sit up and pay attention.' For better or worse you have woken the judge.

It is important to be careful that you are not overflowing in your attempt to chat to the judge. All the judge requires is your number and perhaps name and they have no time for an involved conversation

about the weather, the condition of the ground or any family ties.

Riders often make judges very nervous by hovering around the judge's new car, especially some new sporty job. Be warned, a scratched car is not going to get you any bonus points. Nor is attempting the art of 'put the horse's head in the drivers window' or the trick 'rein back into the car'. Keep your distance and get on with showing the judge the rapport you have with your horse. Working around the arena you have the chance to show your horse at his best to the judge. This is your moment of freestyle so make the most of it. Remember first impressions last longest.

Once the car horn goes it is always a good idea to quickly look and acknowledge the judge to check it was that car's horn. Once you have established that it is your time to enter don't spend all your time making

ever decreasing circles in the gateway. Be very positive and get into the arena as quickly as possible.

Now the halt at X is one of your most important movements. Make sure you look the judge in the eye and make a very positive and disciplined salute. Be confident and have the attitude 'this is going to be worth watching'. Take your time during the test and make certain you know the test in-side-out. You know where the movements start and end and which movements carry co-efficient marks and ride every movement as precisely as possible.

One very important point is that every dressage arena in the universe has one thing in common - wait for it - THEY ALL HAVE FOUR CORNERS. And on average about thirty corners per test are ridden and the corners show the judge balance, flexion, impulsion, suppleness, engagement and above all, rider discipline. You guessed it, corners really show the dressage horse at its best or worst and too many riders forget this - that is another easy mark!

With little effort you could be winning already - so read on!

Riding movements and knowing where they begin and end is of the utmost importance.

Lets take a Prix St.George movement - B - G half pass left

C track right

next movement begins at M

so now pretend you are the judge and the movement is ridden these ways. Give them a mark.

1. Starts a little lacking bend and quarter trailing but is quickly corrected to a great half pass in the second half finishing well, nice change of flexion and balanced forward corner

2. Starts just brilliantly, then loses bend and quarters trail causing the change of bend to be difficult and the corner not good.

Yes of course, the first will score more.

The judge awards the mark at the end of the movement and if the movement finishes well that tends to overshadow faults at the beginning. It is far better that the judge be excited about a great finish to a movement than to be elated with a great

beginning and become disappointed as the movement progresses. The faults are probably the same but to make good of a poor beginning certainly outweighs a fantastic start with a deflating end.

Riders often give up if something goes wrong. Never never allow this to happen. Top competitors make marks out of mistakes and this is why you must know where every movement ends so you can make the most of it. It is similar to a tennis match, one point ends and you get on with the next with no thought of the last. You must only think of impressing the judge, dragging points out whenever the chance allows. It can become quite a battle of wits. It's good fun not only for the rider but if a judge gets the impression that the rider is confident with the arena and the movements and can make good out of bad then that is the art of winning marks.

Some of the world's best riders are not necessarily the best competitors.

Competitors use their heads, they are calculating, they take control of situations and know when to push for an extra mark or to hold back to gain an extra mark.

Always make all movements obvious to the judge.

A judge will ask himself 'Was that a transition from medium to collected? Was it a five? No, it should be at least a six as there was an attempt to show a transition... another mark gained. Always treat the judge as being simple and state the obvious clearly.

Well we are at the end of the test now and the final salute is just as important as the first. Make it the best you can - straight and forward - a very disciplined salute and a look at the judge with great confidence and above all enjoyment, no matter the quality of the test - there are 80 marks to be allocated after the salute.

Imagine you're judging and as the test finishes the competitor's horse has become rigid with excitement due to a Clydesdale in harness trotting down the road, the halt, salute and exit looks like this:

Rider one salutes and smiles, with a little shrug of the shoulders and a gives a reassuring pat on the neck to their horse as if to say 'Well that was a shame but these things happen and it wasn't too bad'.

Rider two salutes, scowling, purple in the face, with no eye contact and half looking over their shoulder at the distraction. There is no acknowledgment for the horse's well being and they give their mount a dig in the ribs with the spur for its trouble.

Don't think it bizarre, this happens all the time - it is obvious but how many riders throw many marks away at the last salute. 80 marks are quite often assessed between the halt and leaving the arena and the rider mark is often assessed as the rider leaves the arena at A. The judge may look up to refresh their memory of the rider and to see the rider hooking in to the horse for a mistake made in the arena is not going to promote a great mark.

Be warned - no matter what - this is not the time for disciplinary action - it will not enhance your mark, quite the opposite.

Never go ballistic about your horse's attitude - never do it - take note - judges remember and there will be another time that you compete under that judge.

The test is over, you did your very best, as did the judge. No matter what your result be composed at the scoreboard, be modest in your winning and controlled if you have disappointing scores.

The judge will no doubt judge you again, so make sure you take heed of the scoresheet comments and store these comments under that judge's name and remember them so next time they judge you they will notice you have taken their comments on board and the test will be more to their liking - more marks!

Take good care of your horse, your partner, your friend. It is a sport and a great one at that. Try always to control your emotions, no-one likes being beaten, especially by one mark, but there is always next time and probably plenty of room for drawing an extra mark.

Be loyal to your training program and don't ever hesitate. Be confident and bold and above all enjoy making marks within the framework of the test.

- Hey, I won by one mark - one mark or 50, a win is a win.

It is all attention to detail that makes good become excellent.

