

Our First Dressage Show EVER!

By Anne Coldiron

There should be a manual for dressage beginners – maybe “Dressage Rules for Dummies”. A chapter should then be devoted to the scoring process and show expectations for the woefully uninformed.

Since the manual was not available 6 or 7 years ago, when Evan was 12, and over a foot shorter, we stumbled blissfully unaware into our first show.

Evan had just come to Chestnut Oak Stables and fallen for Dressage. He rode the infamous schoolmaster Degen. Most of VADACC seemed to be familiar with the sometimes-evil Degen: show name Degenheart. He reportedly made adult students cry if their seat bones were incorrect by spinning in place or grazing a wall until they sat evenly. Known as the ultimate tattletale, Degen could humble a rider in five minutes or less.

He was also the ultimate teacher. Since Evan had been jumping only a short time and didn't have many bad habits to break, Degen trained Evan to sit evenly, correctly. Evan became Degen's boy and he took care of him – correctly.

Just a few months after beginning the Dressage lessons it came time for the first schooling show at COS. At the time I had no concept of what a 'schooling show' really meant. We searched and searched for a boy's show jacket (OMG what an ordeal) and I won't even share the trauma involved in trying to find boy's tall boots!

Evan scrubbed and scrubbed Degen until he positively glowed. From flea-bitten to almost white, and after copious amounts of purple shampoo – that stains EVERYTHING purple – his mane and tail were luxuriously white. In fact, many people at the show stopped in their tracks not recognizing Degen in his now glorious state of beauty.

Degen was soon tacked up, black saddle shined, black bridle gleaming, white show pad with black trim placed on the prancing show horse. Evan's boots were shined, coat brushed off and hat and gloves donned. I poured over the time sheet to make sure he went to the warm up area on time, since we had no idea what a show routine was yet.

Suddenly it was show time. As Evan and Degen entered the ring my heart was in my throat. I grabbed my husband's arm as he cast a worried look at me. I think he thought I might pass out. I didn't know what to expect. Evan looked nervous, but Degen looked confident, as if to say: “Hang on boy, I've got this.” And he did.

Down centerline they trotted, halt, salute on 'X'. Degen's ears angled forward and they were off. Both horse and rider were pictures of grim determination. Around on a 20 meter circle to the right, another on the left, (ah, yes, the fascinating Intro test) - I was struck at how quiet it was, kind of like a golf tournament – so very civilized.

To my inexperienced eyes the patterns and gaits looked like the diagram in the Whinny Widgets book – but what did I know? Degen and Evan were pictures of concentration. And then it was over, halt at 'X', salute. As he walked forward and smiled, the judge spoke to him and he moseyed out of the ring. People around me clapped, his teacher, Barbara, was very happy, I'm sure my face was about to split wide open in a smile. Evan's dad tactfully retrieved his arm back from my death grip. I

think Evan was a mixture of relief and joy. Degen seemed pleased and waited none too patiently for treats, richly deserved. We survived – whew!

Evan untacked Degen then walked him around to cool off. Then what? Do we wait for announcements somewhere? Is there an awards protocol? Are we supposed to do something? The manual would have been handy about now.

After a few moments of wandering around, someone handed Evan his score sheet. He looked at it and his face turned positively crestfallen as he handed the sheet to me.

“I’ve failed the test, Mom,” he mumbled, lip quivering.

“What!” I snapped as my mouth flew open and I grabbed the paper and stammered, “But I don’t understand, sweetling, I thought you did the test just like the pictures.”

“But a 66.8% on a test is an “F”, Mom!” He almost wailed.

“But how can that be? How could you have gotten a failing score? Gah, I wish I understood Dressage.” (...Manual)

Just then a rider named Sarah Worsham, who had been observing this pitiful exchange walked up and asked to see the score sheet. She was dressed in her beautiful show coat with a rhinestone stock pin and sparkley hair net holding her blond bun.

Suddenly she started laughing, “This is a very good score – you may have even won the class.”

“But how can that be? It was a failing grade?” I asked.

“In Dressage this is a good score, especially if it’s your first show ever,” she chuckled.

“Then how does anybody get a 95 or 100?” Evan inquired.

“Oh, no,” she quipped, “a score in the 70’s is exceptional. I have never even seen any in the 80’s.” (Clearly this was pre-Totilas)

We stood there, silently as she strode away trying to absorb the concept of this foreign grading scale.

As it turned out, he did win the class and then received reserve champion on the next test. This time when the score of 68% came in, we weren’t devastated into a tailspin about the failing score. Whew!

We have had MUCH to learn as Dressage has many, many, dare I say again, many rules. I will tell you the only way I got through the first recognized show entry form was to throw myself on the mercy of Jane Walker and Lynn Whiteside-Jones, whose office is just down from mine. I still didn’t have a good grasp of schooling verses recognized – recognized by whom, I wondered? Jane and Lynne patiently guided me as I didn’t even know what half the terms meant. Again, Manual.

We have learned much since that first show and are grateful for all the help given to us – but I still wish I had had a “Dressage for Dummies” book for the tragically uninformed!