

Western Dressage: A Classic Sport Wears a New Hat

A five-part series to learn more about the exciting new discipline of western dressage

By Jennifer M. Keeler for the WDAA

Part I: What is western dressage?

When most equestrians think of "dressage", they envision the graceful harmony of beautiful horses with riders clad in top hats and tails, dancing together through musical freestyles in an Olympic stadium. But now, an increasing number of competitors entering dressage arenas will be wearing Western hats and boots with their horses outfitted in Western saddles. What's going on?

"Western dressage" may be the hottest new discipline in equestrian sport, but it's based on concepts which are centuries old. Commonly translated from a French term meaning "training" of horses, some principles of classical dressage date back to ancient Greece. Today, in addition to modern dressage competition, these principles continue to be widely applauded as a foundation of training for horses competing in almost every sport; some disciplines such as combined driving and eventing even include dressage as part of their multi-phase competitions.

Now these dressage principles are finding a new niche in the Western horse world, combined with influences from western horsemanship masters such as Ray Hunt, Tom Dorrance, and Spanish vaqueros. "Obviously, the sport of dressage isn't new, but western dressage presents it in a new way that works for western riders," explained AnnMarie Brockhouse, a long-time amateur western competitor who now is an enthusiastic western dressage fan and cofounder of a Minnesota western dressage rider group. Just as eventing and driving have adapted dressage tests to reflect the needs of those individual disciplines, western dressage is made to order for western-type horses. "Compared to horses competing in modern dressage, our western mounts aren't built the same, don't move the same, and don't have the same purpose," Brockhouse continued. "Our goal isn't Grand Prix dressage at the Olympics - it's a western horse performing as well as he can in his own arena."

Despite the obvious differences in dress and saddlery, the worlds of modern dressage and western dressage are not as far apart as may seem at first. "There are probably more similarities than differences, as many of the concepts are the same: progressive, correct, systematic training, with one step building onto the next, building the horse physically and mentally for a performance goal," noted Brockhouse. "We're looking for all the same qualities: we want our horses to be supple, have self-carriage, be light in the bridle, and happy in their work, all while recognizing that our horses will have a different purpose, whether it be out on the trail, working cattle, running barrels, or performing in a show ring."

In response to growing interest in the idea of western dressage, the Western Dressage Association of America, or WDAA, was founded in July of 2010, and registered as a non-profit organization five months later. Brockhouse came on board as a staff member, working tirelessly with an impressive lineup of industry experts comprising the all-volunteer WDAA Board of Directors. In just a few short years, the WDAA has grown from a simple concept born of discussions among trainers to encompass XXXX members (a number which increases daily), a growing network of state and international partners, and a new affiliation with the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF).

Above all, the WDAA is dedicated to educating horsemen about western dressage, and Brockhouse believes this search for knowledge is fueling the growing excitement among riders. "I think riders, like me, are more open now to new ideas than in the past and are seeking to educate themselves about correct training," she said. "There's a growing movement that there should be more to our sport than just 30, 60, or 90 days of training and then go in the show ring with a 'finished product'. Riders want to do better by their horses, so I think that's a big part of the appeal of western dressage: it's a very logical progression of training that's going to help develop my relationship with my horse and also enable him to be a better athlete. Western dressage applies to all horses and everyone from grassroots riders to professional trainers and is a proven training platform regardless of what the ultimate goal for a horse may be."

These sentiments about western dressage are summarized in WDAA's slogan: *It's About the Journey*. "Working with horses is a lifetime of growth and learning," noted Brockhouse. "With western dressage concepts, fans appreciate the progression their horses make physically, their mental growth, the maturity that develops, and the relationship that blossoms between horse and rider. Once horsemen realize the benefits, they want that ride, that special partnership, and to share that experience along the way, all while preserving a wonderful western heritage."

To learn more about Western Dressage, visit the Western Dressage Association® of America at www.westerndressageassociation.org.