

Western Dressage Has Come of Age

Developing in New Zealand

By

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To use the words Western and Dressage in the same phrase seems like a mistake, yet the rapid evolution of the discipline and competition in the United States has proven this to be completely opposite of the initial perception. The fact of the matter, Western Dressage and its derivatives has seen the formation of three membership competition organizations in the United States. And, while this is going on in the US, many other countries of the world are exploring the potential of this new equestrian discipline.

Think about it for a moment. You prefer to ride western style, however, you do not want to compete in western pleasure classes, and you do not want to compete in the traditional dressage ring. What do you do with your western/stock horse? Western Dressage gives you an alternative method of training and competing following the philosophy of natural horsemanship.

Western Dressage commonly known as WD has evolved as a very serious equestrian discipline in North America and is spreading throughout the world. WD is not a competitive form of western pleasure, western reining nor western riding. WD is its own sport, where the natural athletic and mental ability of the horse can be developed and enhanced through training where the horse performs natural, athletic gaits without displaying stress due to extreme discipline commonly associated with many Western training techniques. In WD, the horse is expected to perform a solid 4 beat walk, a synchronized fluid 2 beat jog and an effortless, forward 3 beat lope. All of this is very different from the western pleasure horses performing in a majority of our western show rings.

WD has offered a very real alternative to those who enjoy riding a horse with Western style tack, and are familiar with the gait and style of movement associated with Western riding. The word dressage comes into the picture as one considers the classic maneuvers and movements that are used to make the horse relax to become supple and enhance the free movement using its natural impulsion. WD in its present form is competitions to which the rider can develop the natural

Western gaits in a totally different manner than being used to create today's Western pleasure show horses.

The WD competitions are designed to accommodate all levels of Western riders and their horses. The riders compete in ridden tests that range in scope from training level to free style, each requiring a progressive level of proficiency and skills for both the horse and rider. Walk and jog are the gaits for the basic training levels, with lope being added as the degree of difficulty increases with the progression of the horse and rider. It is important to recognize WD is about developing a partnership between horse and rider.

In this partnership, the horse learns the expectations of the rider through natural repetitive training. To accomplish this, the rider must first understand the natural movements of the horse. The natural relaxed, free movement of shoulders and hindquarters at the walk, advancing to the jog trot and eventually into the 3 beat lope. All the while, the horse is responding in a willing manner, not being pressured, stressed or intimidated by the rider and the training techniques.

With the development and popularity of the walk – jog trot classes in the show ring, WD becomes a natural fit into this training style. Participation in WD has demonstrated the average Western rider is very comfortable achieving success in developing a natural walk and jog trot in their horses when given the proper guidance for the standard of expectation. This simply means, the average Western horse rider can achieve the fundamentals of the sport with minimal outside assistance.

As the competency and skill level of the horse and rider advances, so does the confidence in the horse and rider team. And with this confidence comes the ability to successfully tackle the challenge of the lope by following a sequential progressive pattern of development with the rider setting the timing for the training.

The breeds of horses represented with the Western Dressage discipline come from many different breeds and types: everything from Friesian to Quarter Horses, and Appaloosas to unregistered horses. Yep, the horse you ride does not have to be of a specific breed, and the horses' breed type does play a role in the end results of the performance. What matters most in WD is found in the answer to the question, does the horse move like a Western horse, with a forward ground covering stride at the walk; a comfortable, natural jog trot that demonstrates lift of the limbs as they move forward in a natural rhythm; and a progressive forward moving lope with light contact, while the horse is controlled and guided without resistance. All breeds and types of horses can accomplish this challenge, it is a matter of time and training by the rider.

And the age and experience level of the rider does not matter, from the youth to the mature age riders, WD has a place for all to compete, but more importantly, for all to learn the basic principles of good horsemanship skills, without stressing the horse.

Western Dressage in New Zealand was launched in 2014 at Equidays – Mystery Creek with daily demonstrations held by members of the Western Dressage Association of New Zealand and narration provided by Wayne G Hipsley from the United States. Some of the more impressionable and memorable comments made by the spectators was, “I can do that with my horse”, “I have been looking for something just like this to do with my horse, ” and “This demonstration proved to me you do not need to be a professional trainer to participate in WD.”

To assist those interested in the Western Dressage, Wayne has come to New Zealand after participating in the Western Dressage Train the Trainers and Western Dressage Judges Seminar to convey the foundation for building the equestrian sport in New Zealand. He has conducted clinics for a wide variety of riders and types of horses in the Welcome Bay area, including children mounted on their ponies. His clinics are a means for introducing riders and their horses to the basics of the sport, following his philosophy, “the horse and rider must understand and demonstrate competency in the basics gaits and skills before advancing in the sport.”

Wayne is a lifelong horseman, having worked with many different breeds of horses and types of performances over the years. He has learned regardless of the challenges and pressures to achieve success, nothing beats a methodical natural training of the horse and rider because he recognizes that all horses and riders learn at different rates, no two are the same. And, the introduction of Western Dressage requires the ‘re-training’ of some horses who have been allowed by their riders to lack the proper discipline for the sport.

During his training clinics for horse and rider, Wayne uses a variety of techniques to introduce the principles of horsemanship to assist the rider achieve greater success with their horse. As he has observed, “Fundamentally, all the riders have very good balance and coordination in the saddle, yet they lack the special quality of being able to ‘feel their horse’ during the performance.” He sees his challenge is to assist the rider’s develop the ‘feel’ for the proper movements of the horse, helping them recognize the natural sway of the head and neck at the extended walk, ‘feel’ the impulsion as the hips drive forward, lifting and rotating at the normal walk, and the ‘feel’ of the rhythm and cadence at a natural jog trot.

Of course the training goes well beyond these fundamentals, with turns on the haunches, bending through circles, transitions between gaits, along with the normal halt and stand quietly. He is quick to point out, few riders understand the importance of a horse stopping squarely and standing quietly

without anticipation of the rider's next request. And when lateral as well as reinback movements are added to the upper levels of WD, the riders and their horses must be prepared to demonstrate resistance free maneuvers.

Wayne has a passion for horses, and a deep knowledge about equestrian sports. In his over 50 years of working with horses and horse people, he believes the potential for Western Dressage is the best activity added to the sport. Give it your consideration.

Wayne is no stranger to New Zealand the equestrian community. He has been traveling to New Zealand for over 18 years, sharing his knowledge and experience as a horse trainer, judge and professional equestrian educator with many different horse organizations. He has judged many of the prestigious horse shows in New Zealand which includes, National breed shows for the Spanish Horse, Appaloosa, American Paint Horse, Morgan Horse, Miniature Horse, Pinto Horse; Canterbury A&P Horse Show, North Island All-Breeds Horse Show, Horse of the Year – Western Division, and the Royal Easter Show – Hamilton.

Western Dressage has a place in New Zealand's Western horse community, and with the help of the Western Dressage Association of New Zealand this new sport will be setting new standards for the sport.