



***Veteran official and trainer enjoys an impressive display of dressage's benefits as a fitting final  for a difficult show season.***

*by Melonie Kessler*

The California Dressage Society Championships are a wrap! What a great show final  to this crazy year. Glenda McElroy, Meaghan Mallory and the many volunteers and CDS board members put on a fantastic USDF Region 7 and CDS Horse of the Year championship Sept. 24-27 at the Del Mar Horsepark.

For those riders who were able to qualify with the limited shows California was able to offer (due to COVID restrictions and the horrible wild fires plaguing the state from North to South), this year's Regionals did not disappoint.

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I was very honored to officiate along with six other judges, FEI-ranked as well as S (senior) national licensed judges. I watched four days of horse and rider combinations put their best foot and hoof forward for the chance of earning the Regional or CDS championship title. From Training level to Grand Prix, the amateur, junior, and open riders did a fantastic job showing how their time and dedication paid off producing harmonious performances with happy horses. I would like to share a little of my experience from the four days I officiated.

## November 2020 - From The Judge's Booth

Written by by Melonie Kessler  
Friday, 30 October 2020 02:18

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Judging is a mentally strenuous event. As a judge, we are required to be on site 30 minutes before the first ride to orientate ourselves with the arena and our scribes. I can not say enough about the importance of a good scribe. Their job is to write each comment and score given by the judge for each movement. This is a very important job. I was fortunate to have had great scribes, including *California Riding Magazine's* very own Kim Miller! She and the other scribes were wonderful, never missing a word.

Judging can be very intense as many classes can have riders' scores separated by hundredths of a point. A good scribe makes the judge's job so much easier. Thank you to all the scribes that volunteered. For those not familiar with dressage scoring, here is a brief explanation: The tests are designed with compulsory movements we call "exercises" and are scored with whole or half points. In a championship class there are two judges at each arena. I was positioned at either C (the front) or E (the side) each day.



### Speaking From Experience

On a personal note, I have been judging for over 25 years. I also run a dressage training business for over 40 years and have competed for nearly 50! I have judged all over the country including Hawaii and Canada at local, state, and regional competitions and championships. I am still as enthused judging today as I was when I first began.

I know the amount of time it takes to train a dressage horse, and the commitment necessary to compete and work towards qualifying for a championship competition.

I can see the nerves in both horse and rider and I can see the harmony when the pairs execute the test in balance and grace.

I love judging because it allows me to give a voice to the horse as I evaluate the training that has gone into the performance. Not only do I enjoy rewarding great performances, but by sitting so close, I can see the look in the eyes of the horses which often reveals the willing cooperation of a truly beautiful partnership. Reading horses' body language is a part of the scoring system. Tension and resistance are scored negatively, whereas relaxation and confidence are rewarded.

I notice some small mistakes at times in certain classes such as widening of the hands or accidentally not following the movement of the horse. The instructor in me wants to remind the riders to not lose points by losing their position. Luckily, there is a space at the bottom of each test for judges to comment on the overall performance of the pair and give advice per the training pyramid that could help future performances.

I find the walk work not always ridden to the horse's potential, which is unfortunate as many placings are separated by a very small margin and this is an area in which riders should be careful not to lose points.

A rider's ability to display the horse's range of motion in the horse's topline on a stretch circle is also a very important skill that needs to be confidently shown. These basics are demonstrated in the lower test of Training level and First Level and they are the building blocks to the more difficult exercises of the higher levels.

The FEI division was equally as impressive as the lower level test. High quality horse and rider pairs showed the power and elasticity of their horse's gaits and then, with very subtle aids, were able to collect the steps into piaffe and passage and pirouettes.

Nerves can easily overtake horses at this level as a positive tension in the horse is necessary to elevate and lengthen the steps and strides. The skill of the rider prevents positive tension from becoming negative tension. Years of practice and developing the relationship with each other is essential in performing at the top Grand Prix level. There were many combinations that displayed this partnership and their scores reflected that harmony.

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I was impressed with the high level of preparation and finesse by this year's competitors. And I want to thank each competitor for making this Region 7 Championship a great experience and a joy to judge.

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