

DRESSAGE

turnout

Dressage is all about achieving long lines with engagement and suppleness. Properly turned-out dressage horses and riders embody these values. Discover the sensibilities that mandate style, as well as some grooming tips to earn you the judges' respect.

Presentation

Your horse's turnout speaks volumes about your knowledge of and respect for horses and the sport. So, let's be sure you are sending the intended message. If you look like you know what you are doing, the judge will believe you, at least for the first few important strides.

Tack Tip: As a daily routine, first, wipe sweat and dust off your tack with a clean damp sponge. Heads up: too much water makes foam, which can dry out leather. Be sure to squeeze all the water out of the sponge before applying soap. Then, use glycerin soap and water to clean and protect. Cellulose kitchen sponges hold less water than conventional tack sponges. Daily care takes only a few minutes, but it will preserve the tack and keep britches clean. For shows, polish the metal.

Daily Habits

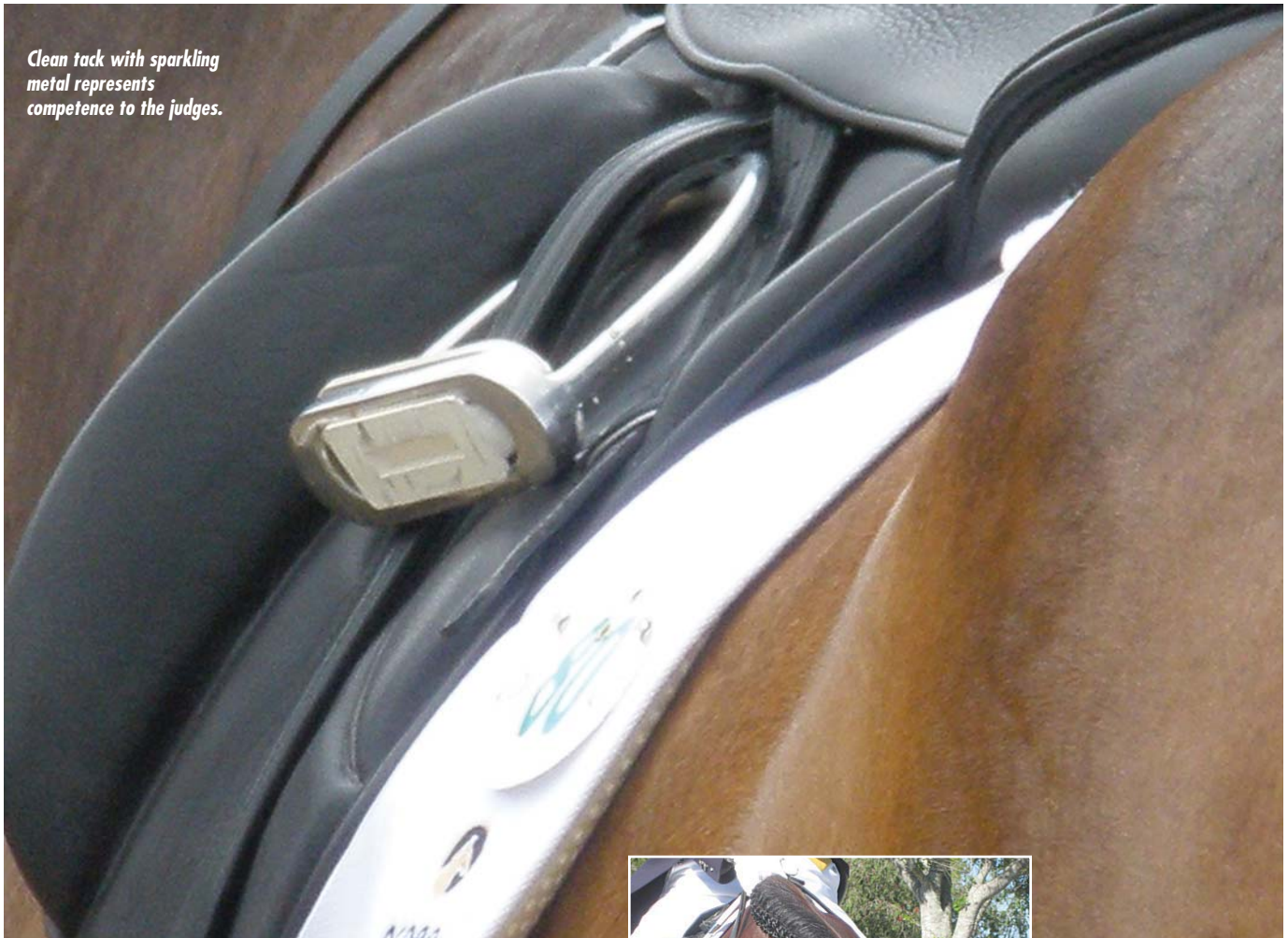
Should you strive for excellence, know that each act adds up. Groom well and consistently at home. You are always establishing your standard to yourself and others. For instance, walking around with shavings in the tail or having a messy work area screams mediocrity or less. Always think ahead and be detail-oriented.

Line

We create the illusion of longer lines by making them clean and crafting their angle. A smooth line appears longer than a curved or broken one. Thin seems longer than thick. We create elegance by playing with perception to lengthen the lines of the horse and rider. For example, dressage riding boots should be super shiny and extra tall, even covering the side of the knee for a longer-looking leg.

Manes are braided to enhance length and roundness. The most important element of braiding is the bottom line. If you were to play connect-the-dots along the bottom of the braids, they should make a perfectly straight line. In this way, effective braids compensate for irregularities in the topline as well as the hairline. Size and relationship of the braids is also important. A few clumpy braids do not carry your eye down the neck – they break it up. You want a proportion and visual rhythm to lengthen the line. Today's warmbloods generally do well to look more refined. Plus, the horse should be able to bend comfortably. The horse can't stretch well with really big braids. Doorknob-size braids are not advisable, regardless of what you may have seen. Ideally, the angle is pitched so the braids are longer toward the poll than at the withers. This closes off the throatlatch a bit for refinement, as well as making the neck rounder when collected.

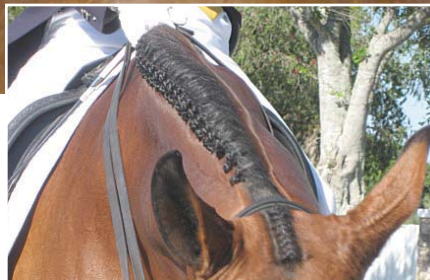
Clean tack with sparkling metal represents competence to the judges.



The cardinal sin is braids that jiggle. They defy the dressage ideal of clean, controlled movement, as can a loose forelock.

When considering styles of braids, remember our objective – a long, clean line. The speckled effect of white yarn cannot achieve the goal. White tape is passé. Now we can achieve a clean line without it, and international horses have not shown with it for several years. Button braids can be very attractive and effective. Nonetheless, three U.S. dressage team riders and a national team coach have told me they prefer braids that lie flush to the neck, but are limited by their grooms' skills. While dressage is Eurocentric, the braiding craft has not had the same opportunity to evolve in Europe. In the U.S., we have specialists who braid day and night for decades on end. These professionals have advanced techniques, and style has followed to maximize impact. However, braiding well is not rocket science. You can learn a tried-and-true formula to yield consistently beautiful braids quickly, with no cramped hands.

Long manes are suitable for Iberian and Friesian horses. Braiding them also involves employing a clean line to lengthen and refine the neck, although the angle is reversed. Since skin stretches more toward the withers, and necks tend to be thick, the line of the braid can thin the neck, while allowing comfortable flexing. Loose ends flying, or a braid that buckles over the crest, break the line rather than achieve our goals. Yet, with some technique, big hair can be managed beautifully.



Look at the bottom line of both these styles. Which braids are able to control all elements, despite changes in the topline and hairline? Remember, the perfectly clean bottom line makes the strongest impact. The bay, Mr. Big, is so roly-poly he could wear a slightly heavier braid, like on the grey, but his mane is thin. Thicker braids would be too far apart, restrict his movement, pull out hair or have a puffy base that breaks up the topline. Braids that are not too far apart can be super tight and very comfortable.

Long Mane Tip: Keep the head up while braiding so the line is optimal when the horse is collected. Finish braiding with ample time before tacking up so the horse can relax while remaining tied up with water. Putting his head to the ground could pull out hair.

Dressage tails are thinned at the top to make the hind end look powerful, yet shapely. To make the hind end look stronger, yet elegant, the top of the tail should be “pulled.” As with

manes, “pulled” is an umbrella term for shortening and thinning. A bushy top makes the horse look chunky and unkempt. Traditionally, hair is teased with fingers and then pulled out, which does not hurt. I have never had a horse even flinch. Clipping the sides is an option if you do not want to keep up on pulling. You’ll still want to thin some of the front so it does not splay laterally and break the line. Bandaging with a damp cotton Ace™ bandage before the class will flatten hair to add definition.

Pulling Tails Tip: Think of the dock as having four sides. You never want to clip over the frontal plane. Nor, do you want to see the dock. Leave some length to the hair so it looks relatively



A nice example of a crisp line. The swoop is dramatic because the horse’s neck is so thick. On a thinner neck, this curve would shorten the neck, and a straighter line would be more appropriate. This horse was braided for schooling. To show, you would want to finish with a color that blends into the mane. That way, your eye is drawn to the braid’s line.

natural from a distance. To clip, swoop up from the point of the rump to the sides of the base, squaring off for the last few inches. Work the front so it can lay flat without splaying to break the tapered line. Thin by teasing small bits and pulling with your fingers to extract hair. Shorten by teasing and cutting with a large body clipper blade.

Engagement

It is easy to assess a horse’s face in relationship to the vertical. However, the true test of a horse on the bit is whether it is coming from behind. The banged (blunt cut) tail effectively frames the hind end to accentuate propulsion. However, if the tail is too long or the angle is wrong, the horse’s hind end appears weak. You want the tail to hang parallel to the ground when the horse is working. However, if you just bang it straight across, that angle makes his hind end appear to trail behind when he lifts his tail to work. If the tail falls parallel to the ground at the trot, the hind end seems to come under itself more.

Banging Tails Tip: Simulate tail carriage before cutting. Make sure all hair is organized to the root. Then, place a rolled towel or arm under the dock to lift it. Cut straight across the bottom of the tail, parallel to the ground. You can also pull the tail for-



Pulled tails enhance the power and beauty of the hind end. You should bandage the tail with a damp cotton Ace™ bandage before the class to flatten the hair.

ward between hind legs, under the belly and cut. Be careful, as a horse can be ticklish at the flank. If during work the tail falls mid-cannon, the hind end seems lighter, looser and brighter. This way, the tail punctuates the hind end to frame and enhance the engagement.

Softness

Mouthing the bit indicates softness. To encourage and spotlight that dressage ideal, never use polish on the part of the bit that enters the mouth, nor wipe off the saliva ringside. Clean foam off the chest and legs, but leave it on the muzzle – unless, of course, it is discolored. In that case, definitely clean the muzzle well. As a rule, make sure the horse is done chewing and don’t let him eat when bridled. Other disciplines always wipe the mouth clean to show.

Properly fitted tack encourages suppleness. The feeling of suffocating or something pinching guarantees resistance. Improperly fitted nosebands, throatlatches and saddle pads are commonplace. Drop nosebands and flashes should sit above the soft part of the nose in order not to restrict breathing. Cavessons usually sit the width of two fingers below the point of the cheek, to avoid putting pressure on the bone. The throatlatch should leave a full fistful of room to assure freedom of movement and maximum wind capacity. Saddle pads should be pulled all the way up into the pommel to allow the horse to move his shoulders freely. I also stretch the front legs after tightening the girth to keep the skin from pinching. Caution: be organized and gentle. You don’t want a hoof through the reins. Plus, the horse needs to shift his weight. Go slow. If instead of placing his foot on the ground, you drop it, you’ll lose his trust.

Soundness is required for true suppleness, so curry a lot every day. Be sure to warm up and cool down slowly. Keep your horse’s kidneys covered when cool. These simple acts are pivotal to preventing lameness.

Respect

After your class, remember to loosen the girth and noseband promptly. It is a great gesture of thanks. Once the horse’s breathing has settled, he’ll also appreciate the opportunity to urinate and get a drink before bathing.

Competing

While first impressions are lasting, what you might not see could have the biggest impact on your actual performance. Have you seen a horse become a showman when he enters the ring? I can guarantee you that horse did not arrive harried. The horse feels what you feel, so manage your time efficiently so you need not race nor worry. Horses thrive off routine. Have a system and

steady, relaxed rhythm to your work. If you learn to braid well, it can serve as valuable meditative time to gel with the horse before your class.

The process of preparing for a show is largely about allowing your horse to feel confident and relaxed enough to be able to focus and do his job successfully. Be well

prepared so you not only look, but also feel like winners. If your horse can trust you to take care of his needs, he'll give more. After all, big hearts win. ■

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