

All About Freestyle: A spectator's guide Part One

by Debby Buck Dejonge

If you have never seen freestyle, this is the year, and now is the time. Even non-horse lovers sit taller, rock back and forth in their seats, and engage in toe-tapping when the music starts and the wonderful dance of two commences. That "five" minutes is the culmination of untold hours of planning, designing, editing, and practicing. When the pair hits the centerline with the music flowing and the glimmering horse struts, everyone knows something good, if not great, is about to happen. Even the irons on the saddle seem to glisten a little brighter under the lights and the rider sits a titch taller, with the horse ever more buoyant. In this two part series we look at the whys and hows of freestyle. My love for the freestyle happened several years ago when my neighbor asked me to ride over and "dance for her". She so loved our little demonstration that she loudly exclaimed, "You should add music to that, it is so beautiful!" Music, I did, and the rest is history. I perform, sponsor, demonstrate, create, and partake in freestyles every chance I get. I aspire to have one ride that resembles Tom Noone's "Macarena" wherein he had the announcer at Devon request the audience NOT to participate with the music. Good luck! That didn't even come close to happening.



I was standing next to Uwe Steiner (Jerry Schwartz's coach) during the freestyle of the century and witnessed a crammed (half frozen) audience go up and down with every footfall of the piaffe and the perfectly matched music. I know there were other freestyles performed that night, but the one that won my heart was perfect in my mind. The horse seemed to be privy to every beat of the music, the tempo, the variations, and pauses. This was the ultimate in communication.

I also loved Jerry Schwartz's ride on Finesse to big band music. He too selected his music for his horse, the audience, and let's not forget, the judges. One of the things that the audience may not know is that the rider may request certain things from time to time like Tom did prior to his ride. The other end of the spectrum is when Cherri Reiber asks the announcer to "crank it up a notch." You gotta love the individuality, which is why the stands never swell nearly as much as a half hour before the beloved freestyle begins.

Here Are The Rules And Freestyle Regulations:

First things first--before you watch or plan for your own freestyle, there are a few things you need to know. In 2001 some changes came about because the quality of freestyles being performed was not always up to par. The chief change is that the horse/rider combination must have achieved a score of 58% in the test of the highest level (or higher) prior to entering a freestyle class. This ensures that the rider and horse are competent to perform movements with ease before they add more difficult components to their ride. Also, the rule will go a long way toward producing rides which can become competitive worldwide.

Riders are strictly forbidden to perform movements above the level they are showing; however, they may execute lower level movements. When watching a freestyle, garner more than your neighbor

by following the rider team as they enter the outside of the arena. This rider has pre-planned exactly when they are going to start, how long it is going to take, and where and when they will perform their entry halt. Watch for the wave. The rider will get into position like a racehorse in a gait and momentarily raise his or her hand to signal the start of the music. Sometimes the music begins instantly and sometimes not. It might be turned up too loud or worse, start skipping. It's always good to have back-up in terms of two cassettes or two CDs.

When a false start happens the rider must wait to hear the announcer ask them to begin again. I know from experience how unnerving this can be to a carefully calculated ride; however, this is also what separates the prepared from the unprepared. You simply have to go with the flow. After the music begins, the rider has 20 seconds to have all four feet in the arena. Most riders prefer to have a few seconds of silence after the entry music for the halt and then the music will continue during the move-off. So much is determined on subjective interpretation, even though the official judging begins after the initial halt/move-off.

Expert Advice:

Dressage judge Janet Brown offered these insights on scoring: The freestyle has two parts to the scoring. First, the ride must be technically proficient. Think of figure skating--if one skater barely lands each jump and another lands every one with flair, who should win? The technical scores from the left side of the score sheet (the required movements at each level) also reflect on the first two scores on the right side--the artistic side. The first score is a bit like gaits and impulsion in a regular test. The second score is a bit like submission and rider.

Then the last three scores are 100% artistic. The degree of difficulty score will only be a six or so if the ride was only as difficult as the test; if the rider is more daring and shows more skill and technique (like doing more triple axels), their score will go up as long as the movements are technically proficient. The audience would need to be familiar with the regular test to know what is more difficult. In Grand Prix, you'd expect to see double canter pirouettes, difficult angles in the half passes, four or five piaffe/passage transitions, flying changes on a curved line, etc. Choreography will be scored on how well the rider develops each movement. The ride should be logical and highlight the horse's strengths. The rider has the chance to hide the weaker movements (let's say a collected walk loses the rhythm, you may see this straight up center line or on a circle down at the A end of the arena).

The ride should not look like a "fly in a paper bag". If the judge has to say, "What is that?", then the score will not be very high. The music score is based on how well the music and beat goes with the horse's gaits and type. Wagnerian opera for an Arabian is not what we want to see. There should be interpretation as well--music getting bigger with extension, etc. My favorite kur for the music and interpretation was Klaus Balkenhol's Spanish kur with Goldstern. It was really wonderful.

Next time we'll look at some more advice from judges, and remember some infamous rides.