SUBLIMAL INFLUENCES ON THE PERFORMANCE SCORES IN DRESSAGE TESTS
By Dr Volker Moritz

I did look at this problem at the end of 1979 during a seminar of the German Judges Association and later at an FEI Seminar. The experience of the past 20 years confirms that this will always be a current topic.

Possibly due to the accumulation of questionable judging in National and International dressage sport, especially in recent times, we have cause to address this subject again. This is also an explicit request to the directors of the German Judges Association to address the topic.

From the title, it is clear that we are dealing with a basic psychological problem as with every type of subjective performance scoring, which also includes the judging of dressage tests. It influences the assessment, where the judge's subconscious takes over the evaluation of technical knowledge, and leads to distortion of the professional opinion. The possibility of deliberate bias - unfortunately there are also examples of this - will not be discussed here. Admittedly, we are dealing here with a difficult and sensitive theme, which we all tend to shy away from. Judges, in discussions among themselves, also avoid this topic. This aspect seems to have utmost significance because therein lies the partially disturbed trust in the relationship between dressage riders/trainers and judges. The necessary "internal independence" must be equally measured against the professional assessment qualities of a judge. The danger of unconscious bias is a possibility for every current judge, for judges that are repeatedly faced with judging the same horses and riders in a short period of time, as well as colleagues, who are only able to judge a few times a year, and therefore are more apt to be subliminally influenced.

The first point we have to take into account is the "Daily Form". It is necessary to disregard previous
memories of earlier performances and therefore achieve a fresh independent assessment of the actual presentation.

The following are the placing for five rider/horse combinations in the three tests of the individual competition at Sydney 2000 Olympic Games.

Rider	Horse	GP	GPS	GPFST
Ulla Salzgeber	Rusty (GER)	7	2	3
Coby van Baalen	Ferro (NED)	3	8	4
Lone Jorgensen	Kennedy (DEN)	8	6	11
Arjen Teeuwissen	Goliath (NED)	6	12	*
Sue Blinks	Flim Flam (USA)	12	9	6

- Did not start due to the restriction of only 3 riders per nation being allowed.

Examples of such differences in rankings from test to test can be seen throughout. The differences were possible because the current jury tried to assess the new test by ignoring the performance of the day before. More difficult yet, the judge must endeavor to judge the Kur in spite of the psychological thought process that the start list was chosen in 3 groups according to the previous days performances.

Closely related to the risk of not judging the actual form of the day is also the self-influence -we will call it - "Guilty Conscience". Separate judging can always lead to one of the current judges deviating in his assessment for a single rider which will decide the score regardless of his colleague's scores. Even when he was at that point using his best judgment, when the judge compares his scores to the others he could be the victim of a guilty conscience when it comes to the rider in question. Often we experience that then supposedly a better adjustment in the next test will be over compensated and even higher scores will be given from this judge than from his colleagues. I'm objectively convinced that this happens in very few cases fully consciously.

Also, "Variations in performance during the test" could lead to an unfair assessment of the overall performance. Everyone has had the experience that a horse started a test very well and then began to make a few mistakes. In spite of the fact that the rest of the test was good, it was judged more carefully than it should have been resulting in an unconscious view, that after these mistakes, a win or a good placing is no longer possible. In a judging system where individual movements are given scores, a mistake with a low score can easily be evened out with the rest of good scores. About this objective we must always remind outside observers, particularly since significant mistakes in movements are more often remembered by the spectators than the highlights of the test.

Another important point is "Unknown Rider" or "Unknown Horse". As a self critical judge you will always have the experience, that certain inhibitions have to be overcome in order to give new horses and riders the points to be placed high in spite of the fact that known and proven horses and riders are also starting. It is however, essential to remain trustworthy, and in this case to have the courage to make a decision that speaks for the performance. "Figure Skating Effect and "Prominent Favouritism" - I am sure you understand what I mean - should not be allowed into our discipline. Certainly we should also protect ourselves from the opposite, whereas known riders and horses generally are critically assessed, after the motto "I expected more of them" or" I have seen them in better form".
I also have to mention the so-called "Discussion" between Riders/Trainers or Owners and Judges. A judge, that himself competes or has participated in dressage competitions knows, that such discussions, which are usually from unsatisfied competitors, can be very "useful" with regard to future assessments. These discussions are supported, and are absolutely in the interest of bettering the basic trust the judges have from the riders. But these discussions should not change the assessment criteria at the next performance of the horse and rider in question.

Further influences on the dressage judge could be "Spectator Reaction", opinions of the Press and different Media. Especially through the reports of the so-called "Press specialists", that in many ways have not earned this title. A great deal

of pressure can be put on a certain subject as was the case at the European Championship in Verden In 1997. We should always remember that the greater value of such reaction and criticism exists in our specialized knowledge. Therefore the judges should try at press conferences and individual interviews with reporters and journalists to clearly substantiate his reasons for scores that were given.

T here is understandably not much to grasp onto to find practical answers to the addressed problem of subliminal influences. It is simply the nature of the problem. Perhaps already a lot has been achieved by simply knowing the possibilities and dangers of subliminal influence. To bring this to light has been the purpose of this short article.

As a dressage judge one must always concentrate on the basic principle: "Judge every test as a new, movement for movement, and only what you effectively see".

Although such a thesis almost always plateaus, one must keep his inner independent basic ideas - naturally in connection with conclusive necessary understanding of the subject - as the considerable prerequisites state, to come to a fair decision. This is the only way that the riders will be able to aim for their future training goals and the entire discipline of the sport of dressage to be well served.

ASSESSMENT OF TESTS

The judge's main tasks are to set standards and enhance the quality of dressage riding and to help riders and trainers by scoring and commenting on the marks.

Judge what you see this day, this test, this performance, movement after movement according to the classical principles of dressage. This includes forgetting all past experiences with this rider and/or horse. No external influences should have an effect on the scoring.

Approach the marking with goodwill. Avoid developing a pure "fault registration machine" attitude. Reward the highlights with high marks. Try to differentiate: a mark of 8 means (only) "good" and a 4 "insufficient". The range is from 0 ("not executed") to 10 ("excellent").

The responsibility of the dressage judge is to record what takes place in the arena and to be fair in assessing each movement of the test. The judge's expectation and mental image of the collection required at each level must be especially clear. Collection, often a misinterpreted word, is the ultimate goal in riding. Every horse, from a young age until it is correctly trained to the limit of his ability, will have a degree of collection (an ability to bend the joints of the hindquarters) even in its working paces. The degree of collection required at each of the levels is just enough so that the horse can perform its test and the movements in it with ease and fluency.

Judges need to encourage riders to take bold risks. If the rider's risks are successful, they should be given high marks. Risk-taking invites brilliance, but it may lead to mistakes. Mistakes sometimes occur as a result of loss of balance or confusion between the horse and rider, as opposed to an error that is directly marked down because the rider misrepresented the movement or went off course. When the judge sees a mistake, he first needs to think of the mark that he was going to give for the movement. Then he has to adjust the mark he would otherwise have given, depending on the gravity of the mistake.

Precision is very important and needs to be rewarded as it adds to the degree of difficulty of the test.

In the case of outside disturbances (noisy children, loose horse, severe wind/noise, etc.), forgive a horse's momentary lack of attention on the first occurrence. On the second time, the score should not be as low as it judged without a disturbance; on the third occurrence, you should judge as you would normally.

The basic principles must always prevail in fulfilling the requirements of the training scale.

EXPLANATION OF THE MARKS

For a 10, excellent – All of the requirements of the training scale have been fulfilled to their utmost. The movement will be performed with excellent precision, exactly on the correct lines from marker to marker.

9, very good - All of the requirements of the training scale have been fulfilled. The movements will be performed with very good precision, exactly on the correct lines from marker to marker.

8, good - All the requirements of the training scale will be regarded as good. Movements are performed accurately, following the correct lines.

7, fairly good - All of the requirements of the training scale will be regarded fairly good. Movements will be performed fairly accurately, following the correct lines.

6, satisfactory – Either the movements will be performed with accuracy and precision, but there will be some weaknesses within the training scale, or movements may be lacking accuracy and precision but still demonstrate good qualities of the training scale.

5, sufficient – Either the movements will be performed fairly accurately, but there may be some clear weaknesses in with the training scale or there may be some fairly serious mistakes. Or, movements may be inaccurate but still demonstrate satisfactory qualities of the training scale.

4, insufficient – Either the movements will be performed fairly accurately, but there may be some serious weaknesses within the training scale with some obvious errors within the movements. Or, movements may be very inaccurate but still demonstrate sufficient qualities of the training scale.

3, fairly bad - Inaccurately performed movements with serious problems within the training scale.

2, bad - Inaccurately performed movements with severe problems within the training scale.

1, very bad - Movements performed are barely recognizable. Showing severe resistance throughout, i.e. rearing, running backwards, etc.

0, not performed – Not performed. There is no fragment of the movement performed.