

Inside the Judge's Booth

By Alice Collins
Jump Media

From their quiet vantage point, dressage judges appear calm and composed, eyes fixed on every detail of the performance before them. But behind each mark on the score sheet lies a wealth of knowledge, quick decision-making and a deep understanding of what true harmony between horse and rider looks like. What exactly are they assessing in each movement? And how do they distinguish a "good" trot from a "great" one?

Few people are better equipped to explain than Bill Warren, an International Equestrian Federation (FEI) 4* and United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) 'S' dressage judge with nearly 40 years of experience. A US Dressage (USDF) Gold Medalist who has competed at grand prix

level and trained numerous FEI riders, Warren brings the invaluable dual perspective of someone who understands dressage from both inside and outside the competition arena.

At every level, judges evaluate each movement on a scale from zero to 10, where a 10 denotes excellence and a zero reflects a movement not performed. Even the smallest detail – a visible aid, a moment of tension, an inaccurate line or a late transition – can influence the score.

"A great ride equals harmony; it's technically correct, well balanced, correct into the contact and in self-carriage," affirms Warren, referring to the fact that the best dressage horses carry themselves in an uphill frame without leaning on the rider's hands.





Photo: Susan J. Stickle Photography

Alongside the numerical mark, judges include concise comments recorded by their assistant, known as the scribe, whose notes help riders understand not just what their scores are, but why. Certain movements carry extra weight through coefficients – such as the canter pirouettes at grand prix, which are the ultimate test of collection, balance and controlled power.

“Scribes are critical because the competitor must be able to look at their tests and clearly be able to read and understand why they received each individual mark,” he continues. “I’m mindful not to overload him with comments; clarity is everything.”

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ASPIRING TO EFFORTLESSNESS

The best rides appear effortless – horse and rider moving as one, the aids almost imperceptible. Reaching that level of invisible communication takes years of training and patience.

“Dressage is a journey with every horse,” says Warren, “and it takes so much time as a rider to develop a correct seat. When it all comes together, it’s a wonderful feeling, but there are no shortcuts.

He adds, “I love horses and feel fortunate to be in these gorgeous stadiums around these wonderful animals. As a judge, I try to be useful to the rider in my assessment and help them understand how to improve their performance. In addition, I’m always looking out for the best interest of the horse.”

At international shows and major championships, several judges – anywhere from three to



Photo: Andrew Ryback Photography

seven — scrutinize the same test from different positions around the arena. The judges' scores are averaged to produce the final percentage. That 360-degree perspective means nothing escapes their notice, from a slight crookedness on the centerline to a transition a stride off the marker.

THE CHAMPIONSHIP STAGE

Both World Equestrian Center (WEC) locations are now premier destinations for the sport. WEC-Ocala has established itself as an international hub for top-level dressage and will host the US Grand Prix Dressage National Championships in May 2026, where the nation's best riders will vie for a coveted place on the team for the FEI Dressage World Championships in Germany later that year.

Meanwhile, WEC - Wilmington was selected as the new host venue for the US Dressage Finals, which took place in early November 2025.

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“The US Dressage Finals is special because it brings together the top combinations from every regional championship,” says Warren, who has extensive experience judging at the show. “This was my first experience judging at WEC - Wilmington and I’m happy that all championship classes can now be held indoors. WEC is an incredible facility. It gives that international feel, which is exactly what we need



The Scales of Training

Dressage judging is rooted in the Scales of Training — an internationally recognized framework that guides the systematic development of the dressage horse. These six elements — rhythm, suppleness, contact, impulsion, straightness, and collection — build upon one another like steps on a ladder, forming the foundation of correct training.

In the U.S., the competitive journey begins at Training Level, where horses demonstrate the basics of a correct way of going. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Grand Prix, the highest level of the sport and the gold standard at major championships such as the Olympic Games and FEI World Championships.

At every stage, dressage should appear effortless and harmonious, with a horse that moves forward freely and elastically, responding to subtle aids without tension — no matter the difficulty of the exercise being performed.



Photo: QZ Photography

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For Warren, judging at major championships – whether in the U.S. or Europe – remains one of the most rewarding parts of his long and esteemed career.

“To sit and assess the top riders, horses and combinations is beyond thrilling,” he concludes.

As the final scores are tallied, it's clear that the view from inside the judge's booth offers far more than just numbers on a score sheet. Each mark represents an expert eye recognizing and rewarding harmony, precision and the partnership that defines great dressage. With knowledgeable judges like Bill Warren guiding riders and venues like WEC providing world-class stages, the future of American dressage is poised to continue its upward trajectory – one thoughtfully judged one test at a time. 🐾

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