



How to Design

Make
the most
of your
freestyle
choreography.

By Beth Hall

Musical freestyle choreography offers each rider the opportunity to showcase their horse's special skills and abilities. The freestyle score sheet is divided into two parts—technical and artistic. Technically scored movements are judged according to the quality of their execution, just as in any dressage test. The way you present your choreography is judged artistically. By focusing on three important design categories—judge's viewpoint, technical difficulty and efficient use of the arena—you can maximize your scoring opportunities. Take time in designing your choreography, because low scores can be the result of careless or hasty planning and not necessarily a reflection of your good training. The following suggestions will help you with choreography. If you plan for high scores, you're more likely to receive them.

Judge's Viewpoint

Begin by imagining yourself in the judge's box at C and design from this vantage point. To justify high marks, the judge needs a good view of every movement's basic qualities, such as straightness or degree of bend. You make the most of scoring potential by presenting your horse to best advantage for judging.

As you design, allow the judge breathing space to give a comment and score. This is possible with three movements in sequence but less so with four movements. Overly clever designs can be too difficult to ride and also hard to judge, so don't outsmart yourself. Clarity is one of the most important qualities you bring to your design. Diagram the complete choreography on paper; if you have trouble drawing the design, the judge is likely to have trouble understanding the design.

Directional placement is important and it's wise to take a conservative approach when planning movements. You don't want to risk losing a point or receiving a negative comment simply because the judge couldn't see the movement properly. The following lateral movements are best performed going toward the judge at C: leg yield, travers, renvers and half pass.

All other movements can be ridden away from the judge at C, depending on the line taken, and work as directional set-ups for the movements listed above.

Some movements should not be performed on the centerline going directly away from the judge at C because too many basic qualities vanish from view. For example, it's very difficult to judge pace changes such as medium to free walk. By relocating to the quarterline, you largely solve the problem for a judge at C. The following movements can be

successfully shown on the centerline going toward A: shoulder-in, walk pirouette and canter pirouette.

Film the choreography from the judge's box and you'll see exactly what the judge sees. If there will be more than one judge, it's not a bad idea to film from several vantage points.

Technical Difficulty

As you plan your choreography, you'll need to decide the degree of difficulty to include in your design. There is a certain debate on this issue, as some riders feel that long, simple lines create the best impression, while others believe more difficult patterns will be higher scoring. In my personal experience as a freestyle designer, difficulty wins.

Your job as designer is to stretch your horse's capacity in each movement without overshooting the mark. You improve your artistic score for "degree of difficulty" only as long as the quality

of the work doesn't suffer from the extra demand; guidelines established by the FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) assert that poor execution "must be taken into consideration as deductions in the degree of difficulty scoring." The key is to add a little difficulty to each required movement rather than a few super-difficult movements or combinations.

The U.S. Dressage Federation (USDF) defines difficulty as the horse and rider team successfully performing "a single element or a combination of elements in a way that exceeds the requirement of the level." FEI guidelines state that "for each movement with increased degree of difficulty (calculated risk) the score should rise accordingly."

To understand the levels of difficulty I have included sample patterns beginning on the next page. When determining difficulty level of a pattern, start by studying the standardized tests to learn the minimum technical requirements for

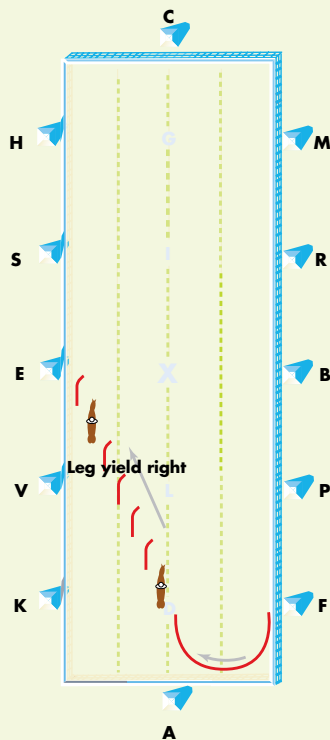


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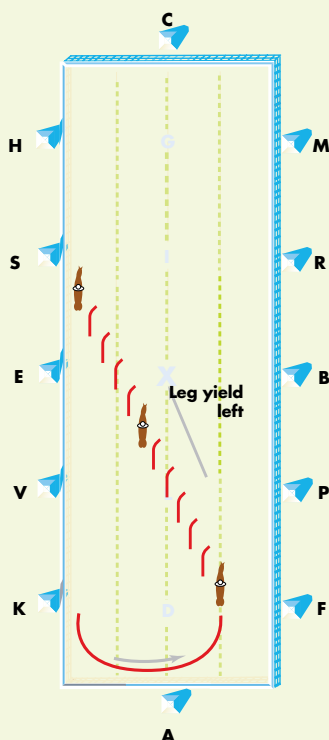
Hall's client Beth Sproule-Hanson on her Oldenburg stallion, DaVinci.



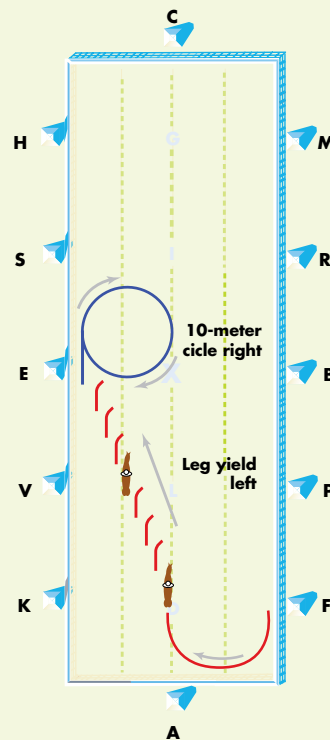
First Level PATTERNS



First A, minimum difficulty



First B, added difficulty



First C, easy combination

your level of freestyle. According to FEI guidelines for scoring (Annex VI, “Directives for Assessing the Degree of Difficulty in a Freestyle Test” in the FEI Rules for Dressage Events), you should receive a score for “degree of difficulty” of 6.0 “when only the minimum requirements for the basic level are fulfilled.”

The first diagram (see First A, above) shows a test-like pattern for leg yield at First Level—turn right onto the center-line and perform leg yield left. Diagram First B, above, shows how you can increase the difficulty: By changing the direction of your turn to begin leg yield, you require the horse to adjust from left bend to position right. If, in addition, you begin the leg yield from the quarter-

line, you add difficulty by taking more strides in leg yield on a longer line.

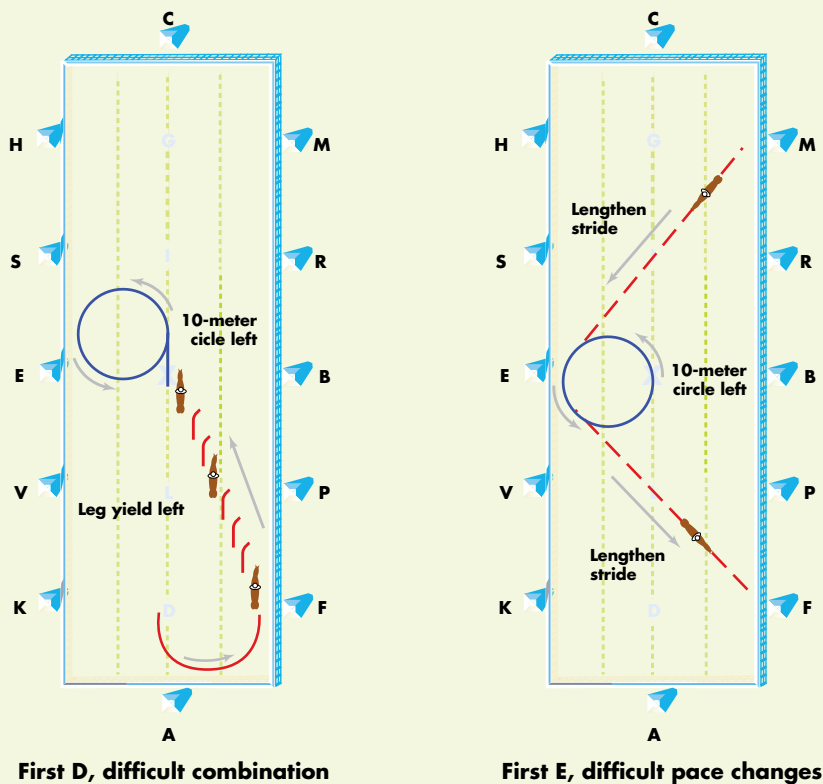
Each movement showing “a rise in the degree of difficulty according to the level of standard tests” should receive a minimum score of 7.0 for “degree of difficulty,” as stated in FEI guidelines. When you boost difficulty one movement or combination at a time, you no longer feel you need to take “all or nothing” risks.

Analyze each movement in your design to determine the underlying traits that make that movement difficult. You might want to review the training pyramid when you start this job, because you’ll be considering the qualities of rhythm, relaxation, connection, impulsion, straightness and collection demon-

strated in various movements.

For example, one of the primary difficulties in training half pass involves teaching the horse to step toward the direction of bend. When you increase the degree of bend, you make the movement more difficult to perform. In addition, greater bend directly results in placing the horse on a steeper line of movement. By increasing the bend in half pass to the limit of your horse’s comfort level and taking a slightly steeper angle in your line, you create the potential to improve your “degree of difficulty” score.

Build difficulty through combinations as well as in individual movements. Pay attention to the difficulty level of “connecting” steps and look at the way these



steps contribute to creating a difficult sequence. For instance, keeping the same direction of bend is the simple way to design combinations. Frequent changes of bend are more difficult.

At First Level, it is easiest to follow leg yield with a circle requiring bend in the same direction as the horse's leg yield position (see First C, opposite page). To make the combination more difficult, trot through the corner on the left rein and begin leg yield left to the centerline. As you conclude the leg yield, straighten and turn onto a 10-meter circle left (see First D, above). This combination shows left bend in the corner to position right in leg yield and left bend on the circle.

It is less difficult to maintain a work-

ing pace than to perform transitions from working to lengthened and back. Add difficulty by riding frequent transitions between paces. At First Level, perform lengthened trot across a short diagonal and turn onto a 10-meter circle in working trot at the wall. The quick transition from lengthened to working trot shows a little difficulty. Add more difficulty by lengthening across a short diagonal at the end of the circle (see First E, above).

The length of your freestyle can affect the score for difficulty, so plan to max out the time allowed. If the time limit of your freestyle is five minutes, design choreography from four minutes, 45 seconds to four minutes, 55 seconds in length.

As defined by FEI guidelines, "there is

a close connection between the degree of difficulty and the technical execution as they greatly determine the first two artistic scores" for "rhythm, energy, and elasticity" and "harmony between horse and rider." These artistic scores must be weighed in the balance as you consider how much difficulty to add to your program, because "lack of quality in the execution of the movement is considered a deficit in the performance ability of a rider and/or horse." Whatever your degree of difficulty, the freestyle needs to look easy, as ease of movement can override degree of difficulty.

Movements left and right need to have the same degree of difficulty so as to avoid displaying a weak side. You don't want to put the judge in the position of considering a lower score because you failed to show similar difficulty from one presentation to the next. For instance, at Third Level, you can choreograph trot half pass in different

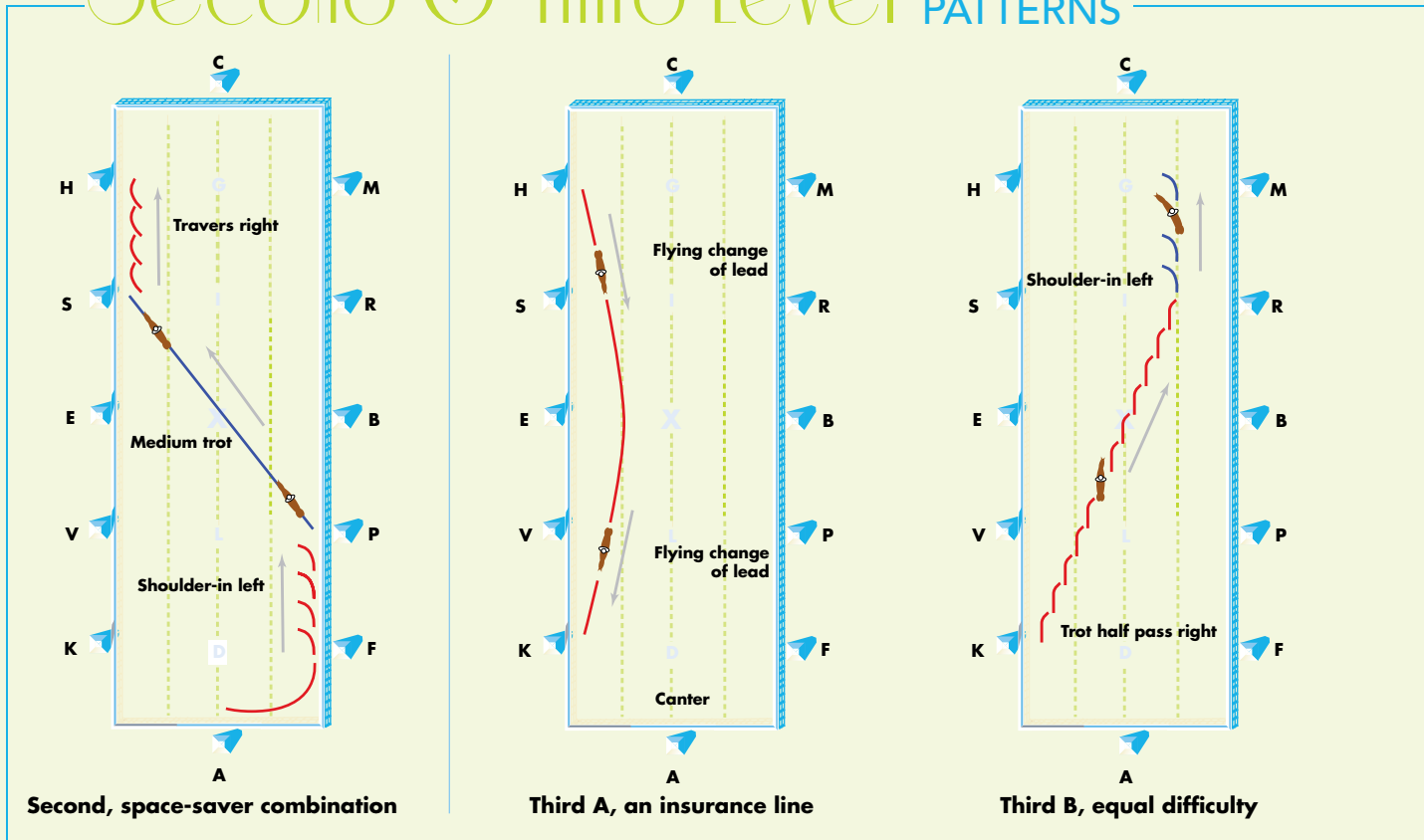


Robin Shehan competes Marsaelis in Intermediaire I freestyles by Hall.

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Second & Third Level PATTERNS



ways while demonstrating nearly equal difficulty. Show a large number of strides in trot half pass on a long diagonal line joined to shoulder-in with opposite bend (see Third B, above). Come back later in the program with multiple bend changes in half pass zigzag and you could receive the same score for each presentation (see Third C, opposite page). Repeat the first combination on the opposite rein to show balanced choreography.

Efficient Use of the Arena

The concepts of space and time are closely related in freestyle. Every step counts. Efficient use of both arena space and allowed time can pay big dividends. Any line causing you to waste space also uses

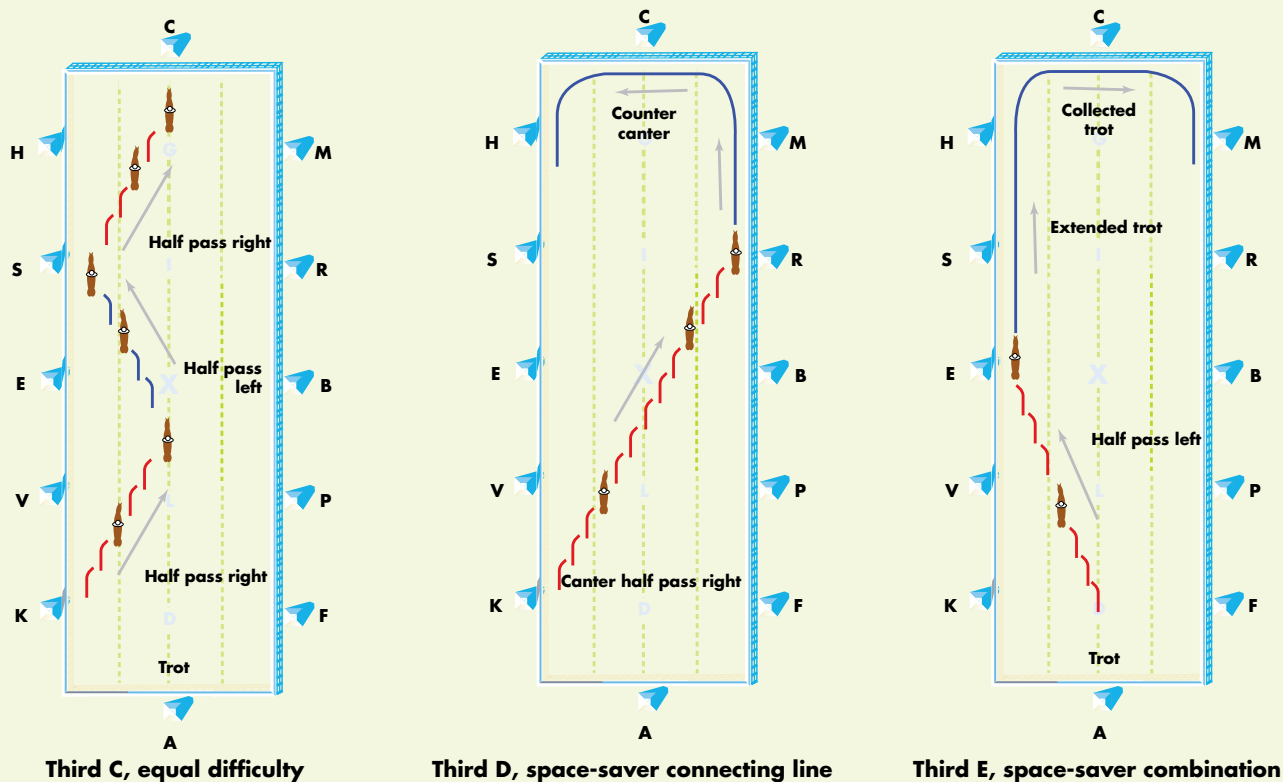
time that could have been better spent performing a technically scored movement. Eliminate waste as you showcase one required movement after another to build solid scoring opportunities.

Space savers use every inch of real estate possible to earn technical scores. Centerlines represent one of the best space savers. Plan a movement for the beginning and ending centerlines and you instantly add two movements to your program. By halting at D after you enter the arena, you reserve space for any movement that can be performed on (or in relation to) the centerline, such as an extension or zigzag in leg yield or half pass. If you halt at or near G at the end of your program, you can apply the concept

to the final centerline. The caveat—planning your final halt at G can be risky if you get ahead of your music.

Short connecting lines make excellent space savers. Rather than ride through the entire short side every time, consider turning onto the quarterline to begin a movement. Use the connecting line to perform a technical movement. For instance, at Third Level, you can continue through the short side in counter canter following a movement, such as canter half pass, to the wall (see Third D, opposite page). You can include counter canter at First and Second Levels to fill connecting lines and potentially add to scores for choreography and difficulty.

Combine movements to show the



greatest number of requirements in the least amount of space possible. At Second Level, perform shoulder-in left on the wall, then medium trot across a short diagonal, and finish in travers right (see Second, opposite page). You've now completed three technical requirements in one flowing sequence.

Space wasters cause you to miss opportunities to perform technically scored movements. At Third Level, if you ride trot half pass left from the centerline to the wall and continue in collected trot around the track before starting another movement, you've wasted space and time from the point you finished the half pass. Instead of collected trot, ride extended trot to the corner, and you've used the

arena and your time allotment more efficiently (see Third E, above). At First Level, you can often substitute leg yield for half pass and apply the same concepts.

Time wasters are non-compulsory movements that take a lot of time to perform in the freestyle and contribute nothing to technical scores. At best, these movements make a small contribution to some artistic scores, chiefly choreography or difficulty. At worst, they detract from your program. I advise my freestyle clients who design their own choreography to stick primarily to imaginative combinations of required movements and consider eliminating these time wasters (except where required):

- halt within the program

- rein-back
- turn on the haunches or walk pirouette
- extra circles at required size
- "stretch the frame"

The following comparisons take the same time to perform. Consider which movements add more pizzazz to your choreography:

- a halt within the program or an extended canter on the long side
- a halt and rein-back or a canter half pass to the centerline
- an extra 10-meter trot circle or a lengthened trot across the diagonal
- a half-pirouette at walk in both directions or flying changes of lead in sequence on the diagonal ending with a canter half-pirouette



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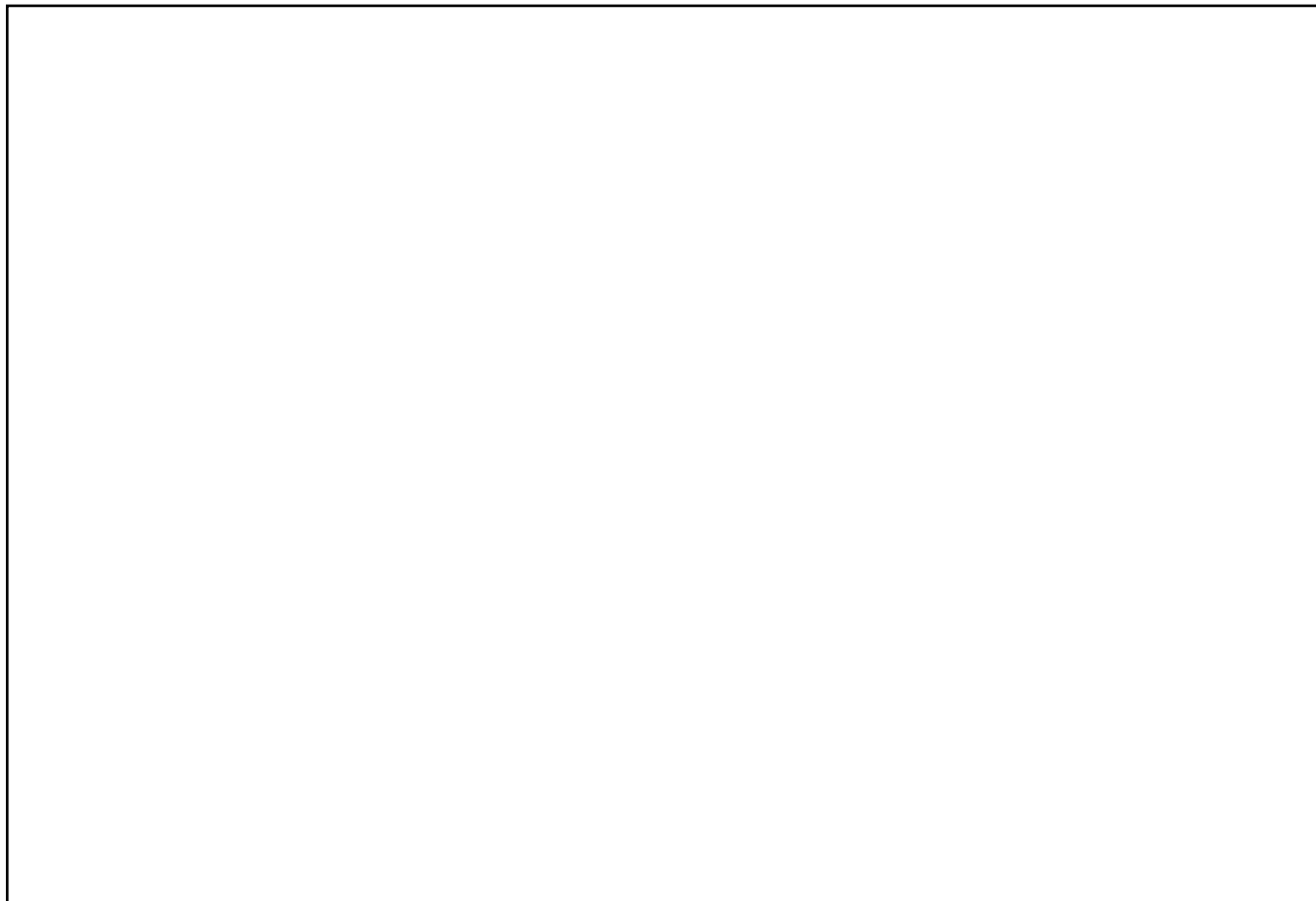
Devon Kane and Douwe are a successful Young Rider freestyle pair.

Here's an example of required movements combined creatively at Fourth Level: perform extended canter across a short diagonal to the wall, flying change, turn onto a diagonal line and perform half-pirouette in canter. Return to the track and continue on the wall with flying changes of lead every third stride. This combination is in no way test-like and keeps the scoring emphasis on compulsory movements.

Time saved through elimination of non-compulsory movements is time gained to insert "insurance lines" or chances to do movements a second time, if your first attempt was insufficient. Of-

ten a technical requirement introduced at your competitive level proves most troublesome. For instance, flying changes of lead in sequence are first included in Fourth Level tests. As an option, you may add an extra line of three-tempi flying changes to a Fourth Level freestyle, which gains you an opportunity to perform this sequence correctly. Conversely, if you do them correctly the first time, you should not do three-tempis again.

Lateral movements new to Second Level include shoulder-in, travers and renvers. The final centerline is ideal for the purpose of repeating any of these movements for insurance. Knowing that




you'll have a second chance to ride difficult movements gives you confidence as you begin your performance.

Look at the coefficient scores in the technical requirements for your freestyle. At First Level, leg yield receives a coefficient of 2 while the 10-meter circle does not. Because of the weight given to scoring coefficient movements, it makes sense to include insurance lines for one or more of these movements.

Reserve the last movement in the program as your final insurance line. Plan alternates that allow you to insert a difficult movement again if you didn't like the way it rode the first time. At Third

Level, for instance, extended canter on the long side easily converts to a pair of short diagonal lines which can be used to repeat flying changes of lead (see Third A, p. 46). Make sure the movement you replace is expendable, meaning that it's not the only presentation of a required movement. Practice the end of the freestyle both ways, so you can make a quick decision under competition pressure.

Success at a competitions can come down to fractions of points. So, make the most of every opportunity and always consider the judge's perspective to maximize your scoring potential for each planned movement. Design to win. 

Beth Hall is music director and choreographer for her Woodwind Studios in Loxley, Alabama. She has over a decade of experience designing freestyles for clients at all levels, including Grand Prix. She is an adjunct professor of music at the University of Mobile, a graduate of the USDF "L" Education Program and was a featured speaker at the 2005 USDF convention.



Jeffrey Hall