

# Adventures in Dressage

*My horse and I learned a lot making the leap to dressage.*

**By Marie Hoffman**

I WAS THRILLED WHEN AQHA ANNOUNCED THAT AMERICAN Quarter Horses could start earning AQHA points in dressage in 2010. I have admired those who rode in this discipline and wanted to give it a try.

I decided to use my stallion, Indian Artbeat, who has an uphill build and large, swinging gaits. He had already earned AQHA Registers of Merit in hunter under saddle, hunter hack and green working hunter. I told my friends that I had the lofty goal of making him high-point earner in dressage. I had no idea what it would take.

## Getting Going

TO GET STARTED, I WENT TO THE UNITED STATES EQUESTRIAN Federation and United States Dressage Federation websites to get “Artbeat’s” lifetime numbers and my membership numbers. I also sent in the lifetime dressage form to AQHA.

I joined the local dressage club to learn where the dressage shows would be; the club sends out an “omnibus,” a booklet that has all the dressage shows in the area for the year in it. The entries have to be sent in before the closing date, which is about a month in advance. So I made a chart of the shows I wanted to attend, checked for AQHA approval and noted the closing dates.

All signed up, it was time to go shopping for my white breeches, stock tie, dress boots and dressage coat. Even though I can show in the lower levels of dressage with my hunter under saddle clothes, field boots and even my all-purpose saddle, it was a good excuse to go shopping.

## New ‘Patterns’

AS SOON AS THE TEMPERATURES IN NORTHERN ILLINOIS (I LIVE IN Kirkland) warmed enough for serious riding, I started to memorize the tests. I had decided to show at the lowest levels I could earn AQHA points in, which were Training Level Test 4, and First Level Tests 1 and 2. It is normal for most dressage show riders to show in only two tests per day, which have to be in the same or adjoining levels.

I work Saturdays, so I could only show one day a weekend, which meant showing in three tests in one day. As we move up the levels, Artbeat will become too tired to do three tests well because of the effort it requires.

I found out that at Training Level, Artbeat only needs to be on contact, have a regular rhythm in his gaits and be obedient to my aids.

At First Level, he should be more on the bit – engaging with his hind legs into contact with my hands. He also has to



lengthen his stride and frame at all three gaits, bend in his whole body, and do leg yields at the trot.

The rider needs to ride an accurate test with proper straight lines and round figures at the correct size. I was excited to get started.

## Details, Details

AS THE FIRST SHOW GOT CLOSER, I DID SOME RESEARCH AND learned more about dressage including reading the rulebook at [www.usdf.com](http://www.usdf.com). For example, the judges like it if the horse bends his joints because it shows more suppleness and engagement. Artbeat is a flat-kneed mover, so I put steel shoes on him instead of lightweight aluminum ones to encourage him to bend his knee and raise the flight of his hoof when coming forward.

I also learned that a horse quietly chewing the bit was good, floppy ears are good, and a tail swish is not counted as anything. Judges like the tail to be lifted off the rump, as a tight tail can signal a tight back.

Horses of all breeds are shown in one class so the horses can be braided in any style. The horses are not required to be clipped but can be to the owner’s wishes. The horses were all clean and shiny, as were the tack and rider’s boots, and the pads were white and square. The bits, whips and spurs are checked to make sure they are legal as soon as you leave the ring after you finish your test.

## First Show

I WAS EXCITED AND VERY NERVOUS OUR FIRST SHOW DAY. I FIRST found the entry office, and the people were incredibly helpful and friendly. I got our number, which is a tag that hangs on

the loop of the browband of the bridle.

One great benefit of showing dressage is that show organizers send you your exact times to ride several days before the show, so you know when you ride. You must be on time, though. The show announces who is next and on deck. The judge rings the bell and you have to enter the arena within 45 seconds; if you are late, you are disqualified. There were many times I was able to show in the morning and be home in the early afternoon.

Our area had AQHA-approved USDF shows almost every weekend within one to two hours' driving distance. And the people were always incredibly friendly. Often, complete strangers offered me helpful comments on wet spots in the arena and wished me a good ride. I found that attitude all summer.

My friend, Janice, came along and read each test for me while I rode it. In dressage, you can have a reader call out the test for you while you ride for the judge. The reader should read each movement just before it happens and only what is written on the test sheet.

Janice, who has a Quarter Horse mare, came to see what a dressage show was like. Later in the summer, she showed her mare and earned a 61 percent and her first AQHA dressage points after only a few shows.

I rode in my tests and waited for my score sheets. The judge scores each movement from 1 to 10. If the score is less than 7, the judge is supposed to write a comment by it so the rider can learn what to improve.

Artbeat and I earned a 59.3 percent, 55.5 percent and 53.1 percent, not enough to earn a point, but we were encouraged. The judges' comments mostly noted that we had inconsistent rhythm – Artbeat was listening to my nervousness. With the score sheet comments, I knew what we needed to work on.

## Show Strategies

DURING THE NEXT FEW SHOWS, OUR SCORES GOT BETTER, WITH many 59 percents but we had not crossed the magical 60 percent point-earning line yet.

I discovered that I could ride the tests better if I was not listening to a reader because I would focus on the reader and forget to ride the horse! I found more value in having my friend video my rides. I would then watch the ride while I had my test and score sheet in hand. Then I could see how the judge saw my ride through his or her comments.

I would walk through each test on foot before I rode so I would not mix up what I was supposed to do. I had the tests memorized but would occasionally mix up the movements, especially what we would do at the walk. At age 55, this happens when I am nervous.

I made up little silly sayings for each test. For example, Training Level Test 4 was "Male Babies Kick A Lot." So at Marker M I would walk, at B it was free walk to K, then working walk to A, trotting at A. The friend who came to help me would remind me of my saying before I entered the ring.

A few of the judges talked to me after I did my test. Two asked what breed of horse I was riding, and I proudly told them an American Quarter Horse. One judge told me my horse had the gaits to do dressage well but he needed to go more forward at the canter with a higher head carriage. Another judge told me that when we come down the center line, she did not want to see any of the neck behind the ears. With all of them, I worked on what they said, and my scores improved. Most judges didn't talk to me, but the written comments helped. The judges really want to reward you for

good riding, and I found them to be very helpful. It was like taking a lesson at every show.

Even if I made a mistake and got lost in the middle of a test – it is a sinking feeling when you go around a corner and forget what is next – the judge rings a bell to let you know you are off course and will tell you what you need to do next, if you can't remember. You only lose two points out of more than 250 at Training Level and 300 at First Level. Even if I messed up, I was still able to get a pretty good score.

At the end of the score sheet, there is a space for general comments by the judges, and they noted the biggest things I needed to practice and what we were doing correctly. I learned that I would revert to "hunter rider" when I was nervous. My homework most of the summer was to sit more upright in the saddle. When I got nervous, I let my reins get too long, and I'd tip forward in my upper body in a hunt seat style of riding, allowing Artbeat to go in a more hunter frame. Artbeat was not the only one who had to relearn what to do.

## Points!

IT TOOK FOUR SHOWS BEFORE WE BROKE 60 PERCENT AND earned our first AQHA point. I was so excited, I danced about the show office.

Indian Artbeat developed a fan club at the shows we went to. I had many ask what breed he was. They were always impressed at his excellent work ethic, how willing and easy he was to ride, plus how good his movement and gaits are.

In showing a Quarter Horse, I felt I was showing against an ideal dressage performance and not really against the other horses at the show. We won our share of blue ribbons (24), but it did not matter if there was one or 12 in the class, I was striving to earn the best score I could. If I earned 60 percent or higher, I was rewarded.

Though we struggled at first and learned bunches, Artbeat and I had a great time last summer and accomplished a lot. We qualified to go to the Region 6 USDF Championship Show in Training Level, earning two or more 68 percent scores in Test 4. We finished 2010 ranked fifth in the nation in the USDF All-Breed awards, at Training Level with an average of 65 percent. We earned 26 AQHA dressage points at Training Level and 45 at First Level, ending 2010 first and third, respectively, in show leaders in those levels.

Overall, I found the experience exciting and challenging, but most of all, it was fun to show off the American Quarter Horse to a welcoming dressage world. If you're at an AQHA-



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