Kristi Wysocki presented her first USDF Sport Horse Seminar for the New England Dressage Association in 2009. To prepare, she was given an envelope containing four magazine articles and five drawings for the overhead projector.

Wysocki now co-presents the seminar with fellow USDF “R” dressage sport-horse breeding (DSHB) judge William Solyntjes. The PowerPoint presentation Wysocki created for that initial seminar started at 100 slides and has grown to 200, and the seminar—now an annual event—fills two days of classroom work and live demonstrations.

There’s a big demand for this seminar, which is required for United States Equestrian Federation DSHB “r” candidates, and the numbers tell why: In 2014, there were more than 60 shows in the Great American Insurance Group/USDF Breeders Championship Series—and only 13 USEF DSHB “r” and 20 DSHB “R” judges.

Along with the need for more judges, American sport-horse breeders are eager for continuing education so that they may improve their programs. Trainers want to better

Conformation, Movement, and the “Fourth Gait”

USDF Sport Horse Seminar explains the fine points of DSHB judging

BY PENNY HAWES

NEW ANGLE ON CONFORMATION CRITIQUE: Seminar leaders William Solyntjes and Kristi Wysocki demonstrate the use of plumb lines on Hedser, a 12-year-old Friesian stallion owned by Iron Spring Farm (PA)
understand how to work with their horses’ unique physical assets and challenges. The demand for further education is also consumer-driven: Buyers want to be able to evaluate young horses’ potential.

The 2014 USDF Sport Horse Seminar, presented by the Delaware Valley Combined Training Association and hosted by Iron Spring Farm in Coatesville, PA, and the University of Pennsylvania’s New Bolton Center in Kennett Square, attracted participants from as far away as Texas, California, South Dakota, and Washington. The 35 participants and auditors spent the mornings of July 26 and 27 in classroom sessions at New Bolton. In the afternoons, everyone drove the 20 minutes to Iron Spring Farm for live demonstrations and opportunities to practice-judge under the guidance of the presenters.

Start with a Wide-Angle Lens

The first day started with an overview of sport-horse conformation and instruction on how to evaluate a horse. All participants were encouraged to have at least a basic knowledge of conformation, and preferably to know the names and locations of the major bones in the equine.

Solntjes advised beginning with a “wide-angle lens”—to form an overall impression of the horse’s conformation, physical development, and balance. He explained the relationship between form and function using illustrations of different equine body types and their ideal occupations. In evaluating dressage horses, he explained, an overall “uphill” balance (withers higher than croup) facilitates the ability to collect and therefore to progress through the levels.

A large part of what gives a dressage horse that desired uphill build is the location of his center of balance. Wysocki and Solntjes introduced the use of plumb lines for evaluating not only the horse’s center of balance, but also correctness of all segments of his anatomy. The horse’s center of balance is located at the intersection of a vertical line dropping from the highest point of the withers, and a horizontal line running from point of shoulder to point of hip. For our sport, the ideal intersection should be back toward the rider’s seat and higher, rather than lower.

Fine-Tuning the Focus

In evaluating the sport horse, the judge moves from a wide-angle lens to a narrower focus. Solntjes and Wysocki described and illustrated correct conformation and various faults, the latter of which are characterized as follows:

Severe: A fault that creates significant concern for future rider safety, horse soundness, or both. Examples include sickle hocks, calf knees, and very soft pasterns.

Moderate: A fault that will limit the horse’s range of motion or create training difficulties. Examples are a thick throatlash, a flat croup, or a long loin.

Mild: A fault with minimal interference with movement or training. An example is a slight toe-in.

Blemish: A scar, splint, or other calcification not caused by a conformational fault.

Cumulative faults: Several faults in combination that can be detrimental to soundness, safety, and training. Some examples include over at the knee and toed out; base-narrow and toed out; or contracted heels and straight pasterns.

The presenters described the ideal dressage-horse conformation and explained the importance of each section of the horse’s anatomy.

The frame and top line should present a harmonious, balanced picture from ears to tail. The ideal frame is a well-muscled, rectangular shape with fluid connections between the parts.

The head and neck should present a well-proportioned and balanced picture. Evaluate the neck to see if it acts as a “sail” or an “anchor,” said Wysocki: If the neck is set on and carried high and proud, like a sail, it will have the desired effect of helping to elevate the forehand. But if it’s low-set and carried like an anchor, the neck will tend to weigh the forehand down.

The withers and shoulders play an important role in the horse’s ridability. Well-developed withers should create a good saddle position, while a long sloping shoulder allows freedom of movement.

The back and barrel should be strong and muscled with a deep heart girth. There should be less than six inches from the last rib to the point of the hip.

The loin is the “energy transfer station” that transfers power from the hindquarters to the forehand.

The forelegs form a pillar of support for the horse’s front end. The cannon bones should be short in comparison to the forearms.

Hindquarters and hind legs should present a long and well-angled hip bone and femur to facilitate collection.

The relationship between the forelegs and the hind legs should show slightly ascending plumb lines running from elbow to stifle and from knee to hock. Incorrect conformation can cause forging, interference, and overreaching.

Feet should show symmetry within front and hind pairs, with angles carrying through the horse’s pasterns.

Conformation is about more than looks, the presenters said: In sport horses, the purpose of breeding for correct conformation is to help ensure soundness and quality gaits and movement.
The Four Gaits

The three most important aspects to consider in evaluating gaits are purity, correctness, and quality, Solnyntjes and Wysocki said. Purity refers to how well the gait adheres to the correct rhythm. Correctness is reflected in straightness, evenness of strides, levelness (limbs lifted to a symmetrical height), and alignment. Quality is the “wow” factor, encompassing volume, amplitude, elasticity, tracking, and articulation of the joints. A horse with good movement should use his entire body, not just his legs.

The walk is a four-beat gait. When viewed from the side, the hind limbs should form an inverted V, and the front foot should “appear friendly” with the hind foot, as the presenters put it, meaning that the front foot should leave the ground only when the hind foot is close by. Dressage and DSHB judges penalize a lateral walk—in which the rhythm becomes unclear—severely.

The trot is a two-beat gait. When viewed from behind, the hocks will turn in and the stifle turn out very slightly to allow greater clearance between the stifle and the barrel.

The canter is a three-beat gait. A four-beat canter is a serious fault because it lacks the required moment of suspension, during which time all four limbs are airborne.

Throughout the presentation, Wysocki and Solnyntjes referred to the horse’s temperament as the “fourth gait” because of its importance in both breeding and riding stock.

Use your knowledge of conformation and gait analysis every day as you work with horses, the presenters advised the audience, both in evaluating prospective purchases or breeding stock and in assessing existing training and soundness issues.

Practice Sessions

The live demonstrations at Iron Spring Farm gave participants the opportunity to practice their skills in critiquing conformation and gaits.

The first group was young horses—a two-year-old warmblood gelding and a yearling Friesian colt. They were followed by five stallions ranging in age from 10 to 21 years. The stallion group consisted of two Friesians, a Westfalen, a Thoroughbred, and a TB/Connemara cross.

Solnyntjes and Wysocki reminded the audience to evaluate all horses against the ideal dressage conformation, not against a breed-specific standard. As they demonstrated the use of plumb lines on Hedser, a 12-year-old Friesian stallion, Wysocki said: “You have to blank out the feathers and the mane and see the quality of the horse. It doesn’t matter what color they are or how much hair they have. The mind has to stay on the body.”

After the participants evaluated a group of mares, the day concluded with an under-saddle demonstration. The five-year-old German Riding Pony, five-year-old Hanoverian mare, and four-year-old Oldenburg gelding gave the audience the opportunity to evaluate and compare the movements of three very different types of horses, as might be found in a suitability or Materiale class.

The Art and Science of Judging

On the second day of the seminar, the focus switched to judging, with the presenters giving an overview of the format of the Great American Insurance Group/USDF Breeders Championship Series and discussing the rules governing DSHB classes. Solnyntjes and Wysocki led the group through an analysis of the score sheets, noting the differences among classes for sport-horse breeding stock (mature horses) and for sport-horse prospects (young horses and classes for individual breeds). They then discussed the process of judging horses in hand on the triangle, followed by explanations of how the under-saddle classes (Materiale and suitability) are judged.

The afternoon session at Iron Spring Farm gave participants a chance to practice their judging. Small groups started by judging a Materiale class, followed by in-hand classes ranging from foals of the current year through older mares and a Get of Sire group.

During the in-hand judging, both Wysocki and Solnyntjes advised waiting until after the horse moves to judge the back and loin when one young mare received a rather low score from the participants. The presenters, who awarded the mare a score of 8.3, noted that the correctness of the loin can be evaluated only when the horse moves.

Another example of the intricacies involved in judging came when a mare presented had a slight toe-in. Although the participants marked her down for the conformational fault, the presenters noted that the mare landed flat when she moved, so correctness of movement trumped the slight defect.

The USDF Sport Horse Seminar gave attendees a greater understanding of the sport horse’s form and function as well as of the rules and mechanics of judging DSHB classes. Whether or not they pursue the USEF DSHB judging program, all came away better equipped to evaluate, purchase, own, and train dressage horses and breeding stock.

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