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The Gallop: Western & Cowboy Dressage

New disciplines' disciples go their own way,
while opportunity for all prevails.

by Kim F. Miller



Cowboy Dressage trainer Susan Tomasini riding her Arabian gelding, UMEL Shahaab, aka Jesse. The sensitivity to the aids required to ride with the slight rein slack seen here is an ideal of this discipline.

Formally introduced to the U.S. as a new discipline in late 2010, Western Dressage has since gained a strong following. It's also been subject to growing pains that often accompany anything new in the equestrian world.

Key players in the formation of the Western Dressage Association of

America's California affiliate opted to go their own way earlier this year. Despite common ground, philosophical differences led some California WDAA principals to start their own movement under the Cowboy Dressage™ banner. Cowboy Dressage, of course, is synonymous with Eitan-Beth Halachmy, whose Spanish Riding School-influenced classical dressage background inspired the training and riding style he established as Cowboy Dressage with the Morgan stallion Holiday Compadre back in the early 1990s. He later trademarked the term and popularized the approach in the States and abroad.

Eitan was among the founders of the Western Dressage Association of America and, initially, he and his wife Debbie supported the WDAA's California affiliate, which earned that status in late 2011. Terry Tomasini was the inaugural president of the state's WDAA affiliate, but he and his wife, trainer Susan Tomasini, were also among those who defected in favor of Cowboy Dressage. It was a matter of "agreeing to disagree," Terry explains. "We are similar but also substantially different in our philosophies and there is room for both approaches." California's WDAA affiliate is now emerging from the limbo created by the organizational split. Although these events created confusion among existing and potential participants, the emerging end results seem likely to create more opportunities for more people to make enjoyable, affordable and dressage-influenced progress with their horses. In that way, the developments serve the key missions of all involved.

Another organization, the North American Western Dressage Association, has brought many horsemen into the sport: its Facebook page has almost 8,500 followers. Although the WDAA received the United States Equestrian Federation's designation as Western Dressage's recognized affiliate this past summer, the NAWDA will continue, says its chief executive director Jen Johnson. "We have huge congratulations for the WDAA," she says. "At the same time, we look at this as a growth opportunity to allow NAWDA to develop with the freedom from the political arena that goes along with the (USEF) recognition. We feel we can excel in educating any person who wants to use Western Dressage for improving their horse."

Philosophies

How Cowboy and Western Dressage philosophies differ is a question that prompts different answers. In simplest terms, Western Dressage is closer to conventional dressage while Cowboy Dressage uses dressage training to execute western performance and ranch horse activities. Both are ridden in western tack and with a rein in each hand, rather than the one-handed neck-reining of conventional western.

"Western Dressage is dressage ridden in western tack and with some modification for gaits, headset, frame, etc.," posits Terry, now a Cowboy Dressage adherent. "While Cowboy Dressage uses subtle dressage cues that allow us to move the parts of the horse for the various western events. It's very western, it's purpose-driven and it seeks to produce the quality of gaits of a horse at liberty."

Reflecting growing international interest, Eitan was invited to demo Cowboy Dressage at the 2006 and 2010 World Equestrian Games. In addition to hosting extensive discipline information on his own website, he is closely affiliated with Cowboy Dressage World. This entity is best described as a "membership by handshake" club, rather than a formal organization. Its main purpose is to disseminate education and information about this horsemanship approach.

Cowboy Dressage goals and training techniques are closely aligned with the Light Hands Horsemanship movement. "Soft feel," as originated by both the Spanish Riding School and Vaquero cowboys of the Old West, is an important objective. This is demonstrated by the sensitivity to leg, seat and weight aids required to ride with some slack in the rein. Lightness, harmony, finesse and partnership are among the method's most important training and judging objectives.



Classical dressage trainer Jec Ballou demonstrates Western Dressage.

Although she has not closely followed the Cowboy Dressage movement of late, WDAA advisory board member and Santa Cruz area classical dressage trainer Jec Ballou was willing to share her opinion on how the two disciplines compare. "There are a lot of similarities, but I would say that Western Dressage is more 'dressagy:' meaning it's more adherent to the classical training scale. And, our competition tests are geared toward building those movements progressively."

Degree of rein contact is one visual distinction, with Western Dressage seeking very light contact and Cowboy Dressage setting the ideal of slight slack in the reins. An observer watching a day's worth of rides by both disciplines' core constituency – amateurs – would probably not detect a big difference in the horses' way of going, Jec surmises. But differences would likely be evident watching professionals ride the respective tests. "In Cowboy Dressage, there is a much earlier request for haunches-in and shoulder-in, whereas Western Dressage pretty much follows the timeline of typical dressage. For example, we would use lateral work as a means to getting further down the road, as opposed to creating maneuverability for the sake of maneuverability."

Many perceive Cowboy Dressage as more fun. "You get to do some of the fun stuff earlier," Jec notes. "We all know that watching a USEF First Level test is like watching paint dry!"

The core belief of both organizations, Terry notes, is doing "what's in the horse's best interest." Both methods encourage riders of all experience levels and horses of all breeds, sizes, gaits and conformation to get into the game.

Competitive Formats & Judging Criteria

Western Dressage competition is conducted in a standard, 20m x 60m, dressage arena or a "short court," 20m by 40m, and is judged by USEF/US Dressage Federation judges. Collective marks are scored on: "1) The freedom and regularity of the horse's movement. 2) Impulsion: the horse's desire to move forward, elasticity of steps and roundness. 3) Submission: the horse's attention and confidence, harmony with the rider, lightness of movements and acceptance of the bit. 4) Rider's position and seat in the correctness and effect of the aids." Accuracy and harmony also count toward the overall score.

There are four tests in each of four Western Dressage levels: Introductory, Basic and Levels 1 and 2. All are very similar to their counterparts in regular dressage. The toughest test includes 10-meter lope circles, stride lengthenings and collections and simple lead changes.

Cowboy Dressage is contested in a specially-designed dressage court with a perimeter that matches the short court. Eitan designed the Cowboy Dressage arena with shorter intervals to better accommodate

the breeds – Morgans, Quarter Horses, Arabians, Saddlebreds, etc. – he foresaw tackling the sport. The shorter intervals add extra challenges and demand more maneuverability. Cowboy Dressage offers eight tests. The most advanced of the regular patterns, the Walk, Jog, Lope Test #4, entails a 20-meter free lope circle, four backing steps and turns on the forehand and haunches. Challenge levels introduce obstacles. At the highest level, this includes opening a gate, stopping in a box and backing through cones in a ride that typically takes seven minutes.

Per Eitan's CowboyDressage.com site, "Judges will be looking for a horse and rider combination that executes the tests in harmony and partnership. They will be looking for and rewarding the 'soft feel' between rider and horse. Release, relaxation, preparation and execution will be the main criteria that judges will be scoring.

Precision, balance, cadence, carriage, control and performance will be of substantial importance but harmony, soft feel and partnership is the goal of Cowboy Dressage and will be scored accordingly. Any rider who hangs or bangs on a horse's mouth or rides with horse's head behind the vertical or with over-flexion will be penalized."

Cowboy Dressage classes have so far mostly been held within breed shows, but the discipline has three days to itself with the first annual Cowboy Dressage Horse Show and Clinic coming to Rancho Murieta in November.

WDAA and the newly re-organized California Western Dressage Associations are formal organizations. As such, its shows and classes are held in accordance with USEF rules, which are extensive. By contrast, the Cowboy Dressage contingent will rely on the "cowboy code" to ensure compliance, Terry explains. If adherents see that a training method has been misunderstood or mis-applied or, worse, abusive behavior, "We will 'address' it."

Both groups place a high priority on educating horse owners on their training philosophies and techniques. Free and for-sale opportunities to learn and practice their methods are plentiful through all three organizations' websites, members and followers.

Upcoming Opportunities

Los Angeles area Quarter Horse owner Sandra Odgen was excited enough about discovering Western Dressage that she said yes when fellow enthusiasts encouraged her to take a leadership role in the re-organized WDAA California affiliate. She and president Jackie Hills welcome help in the affiliate's formative stages. Sandra anticipates that Western Dressage classes will initially continue as part of Open dressage and breed shows. Competitions dedicated to the discipline are a future hope, while an interim goal is plugging into the WDAA's forthcoming year-end award program with regional and statewide high point prizes. She expects a WDAA-backed Train The Trainers clinic will come California's way sometime next year.

On a national level, WDAA is holding its first annual World Championships Horse Show, held Oct. 31-Nov. 3 in Tulsa, OK, concurrent with its fourth Annual Meeting. The event will be held in conjunction with the Color Breed Congress and the Pinto Horse Association.

Cowboy Dressage fans are thrilled to have three days devoted to the discipline during the first annual Cowboy Dressage Horse Show and Clinic, slated for Nov. 15-17 at the Murieta Equestrian Complex in the Sacramento area's Rancho Murieta. Also, Cowboy Dressage World partner and trainer Susan Tomasini presents a clinic Oct. 12-13 at the Novato Horseman's Arena. (visit www.tomasinitrainingcenter.com for details.)

"California is interesting because Western Dressage is very big here, yet we kind of lag behind the rest of the country," notes Jec Ballou. She attributes that partly to the difficulty of finding enough volunteers and partly to the evolving organization structure in California. In the end, however, she's optimistic that all will work out for the best. "By all these

different organizations existing, it's allowed there to be a sport that people can be involved with at different levels."

Find Out More:

Western Dressage

Western Dressage Association of America:
www.westerndressageassociation.org and on Facebook.

California Western Dressage Association:
www.cawda.org and on Facebook

North American Western Dressage Association:
www.northamericanwesterndressage.com and on Facebook. NAWDA's Jen Johnson says Alison Knickerbocker and Sher Boatman are active regional contacts in California. Both are best reached through NAWDA's Facebook page.

Cowboy Dressage

www.cowboydressage.com: Eitan Beth-Halacamy's site: It includes extensive info about the discipline.

www.cacowboydressage.com. A clearinghouse of information and links to related sites.

Also on Facebook.



The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at kimfmiller1@mac.com or 949-644-2165.