

## Musical Freestyles

Want to qualify for Pony Club champs in dressage? Here's my low-cost, less-stress method for doing it!

1. Calculate the tempo of your horses strides in walk, trot, and canter. This is called BPM, or beats per minute. Most horses

- Walk 45-65 BPM
- Trot 70-90 BPM
- Canter 90-110 BPM

How do you calculate this? I find it easier off a video, but you can also do it live. The easiest method is simply to set a watch for one minute, then count the # of times the inside front leg touches the ground in that minute. That is your bpm! You can also buy a hand-held electronic metronome, and adjust it up or down until the "beep" sound of the metronome matches the footfall of the wrapped leg. If you are working from video, you can also download the free metronome for your computer. The metronome method is more accurate than the counting method, but both work.

2. Start picking some music!

I recommend you start with [www.equimusic.com](http://www.equimusic.com), where you can enter your bpm and it lists lots of options for you! Click the album name, and it takes you to an amazon.com link where you can listen to a sample. You want music within about 4 bpm of your horses. You will need walk, trot, and canter music. All the music on equimusic should work well for freestyles. If you go outside the site, keep the following in mind:

1. Be careful the tempo does not change half way through!
2. Be wary of vocals. Use them carefully, and make sure they are tasteful.
3. It needs a clear beat (the kind you can tap your toes to, or dance to!)
4. Movie sound tracks, and orchestra versions of well known songs often work very well
5. Recognizable music is more fun for the audience and judge, generally

Also consider the following as you select music:

1. You absolutely have to really, really like it. You will listen to it more times than you care to think about while you are working on your freestyle. If you don't like it, it will drive you nuts!
2. Try for a theme in all 3 of your pieces—all big band, or rock, or from a certain movie, etc.
3. It should complement your horse. Don't ride your cheerful horse to sad music, or your pony to big swelling impressive music.

When you have some possibilities, put them on your ipod and go ride to them, or at the very least listen to them while watching a video of your horse. Some will make him look/feel worse, some better—those are the ones you want! Decide on a walk, trot, and canter piece.

3. Look up the requirement for your level. For training level:

Walk minimum 20 m  
Working trot circle 20 m, left and right  
Stretching frame in trot, minimum 40 m  
One loop in trot (shallow serpentine)  
Working canter circle 20 m, left and right  
Halt at beginning and end

For 1<sup>st</sup> level:

Freewalk minimum 20 m (x2)  
Working trot circle 10 m, left and right  
Lengthen stride in trot, rising or sitting (x2)  
Leg yield in trot, left and right (x2)  
Working canter circle 15 m, left and right  
Change of lead through trot, both directions (x2)  
Lengthen stride in canter (x2)

All tests have the same artistic scores:

Rhythm, Harmony Elasticity (x2)  
Harmony between horse and rider (x2)  
Choreography (x3)  
Degree of difficulty (x2)  
Choice and Interpretation of music (x4)

4. Start choreographing!

1. Measure out, or trailer out to, a dressage court (or you can use a video of a dressage test done in a full court, if you have one!).

2. Get the approximate time it takes you, in seconds, to complete each of the movement for the level, given above. Time a 20 m circle, from E returning to E. Time a lengthening in trot and canter up the longside, from K to E to M, and on the diagonal from K to X to M, and even on a 20 m circle. A legyield from K to X. Etc. Also time the following:

-a short side (H to C to M), in walk, trot, and canter  
-a long side (K to E to M) in all 3 gaits  
-a corner (H to C) in all 3 gaits  
-20 m circles in all 3 gaits  
-10 m circles in all 3 gaits  
-15 m circles in all 3 gaits (even though this circle may not be required, it can fill up time in music)

- a turn across the arena, from E to X to B
- a diagonal in working gaits (KXM)
- a short diagonal in working gaits (K to B)

#### 5. Analyze your horse

What does he do well? What does he find hard? Is he better if you do the trot work first, then the walk and then the canter, or does he do better if he canters first? Are there any particular things he does well? For example, walk to canter transitions, or canter to halt transitions. Does your horse do balanced circles smaller than required (ie, a 10 m circle at 1<sup>st</sup> level). At 1<sup>st</sup> level, how is your counter canter? Are your legyields very good in the bridle (meaning they will look good going towards the judge at C) or a little fussy (do them away from the judge).

#### 6. Analyze your music.

Freestyles are more than riding to music, you have to dance to it! At first level, listen for a surge in the music that indicates a lengthening. Is there a phrase that seems slinky, implying a sideways movement? At training level, listen for phrasing. Can one section of the trot music be circle work and loops, while one section is straight lines and diagonals? Is there a phrase repeated that you could do a trot-loop to in both directions? Note the timings in the music where this happen—write them down!

#### 7. Put something together!

Download the free program Audacity, which allows you to edit music. Take your 3 tracks and import them. Now, using the timings you calculated above, and the parts of the music that seem best suited to interpretation, cut a rough track together. Typically this will have an intro (leading up to the 1<sup>st</sup> halt, about 30 sec, your choice of gait), a pause, then trot music (about 2 min), walk music (about 45 sec), and canter music (about 2 min). If your horse is much better in trot than canter, make the trot longer and the canter shorter! Try to cut from gait to another smoothly, in a way that makes musical sense. When you are done, write the file as an mp3 for your ipod, or burn to a CD.

Now you have a rough cut. Use the timings you calculated above and start choreographing! Keep in mind the key phrasing parts of your music—I suggest starting with those, esp. lengthening at 1<sup>st</sup> level, and then working forward and backwards. Remember to calculate in the time for corners and short sides. Try to use the whole arena, and work evenly in both directions. Avoid being to test-like (look at the tests of your level to make sure you are not repeating them). Look for interesting combinations of movement to do (for example, 10 m circle at K, then a lengthening from K to M, followed by another 10 m circle). Try to set up your horse for success in the harder movements. Use creative lines—centerlines, quarter lines, serpentines—without getting too meandering. If you can do them well, challenge yourself—a leg-yield zigzag, or a 10-meter figure 8.

#### 8. Go ride it!

You will find some of the patterns work with the music exactly as you planned, and some don't. You can either change the choreography, or you can change the music. Feel free to repeat sections of the music if you need to make a section longer. Revise, and go ride it again!

#### 9. Know your music

Once you have a final ride in mind, learn it really well. Play your music over and over again (in the car, while hacking out) until you can hear any part of it and know what movement you will be riding. Remember that you ride the music, not the test. Do your transitions with the music, not at the letters. Knowing your music well means you will not get lost!

#### 10. Practice.

Freestyle riding is hard! Things change day to day, and ride to ride. You have to concentrate on your dressage, the impulsion and connection and all that, and also on the choreography (go deeper into this corner to wait, cut this corner to hit the next cue) and keep all that in your mind at once! It's also an incredible feeling when it goes well, like you and the horse are really dancing.

Good luck!