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horse is eligible to compete at a lower one. Obtain some copies of the prelim tests so you know what is required in each, either borrow the tests from a friend, your trainer or purchase them from British Dressage. There are some tests that are in 20x60 metre arenas but to start with you are best to keep to ones which are in a 20x40 metre arena which is probably the size you are used to working in unless you are fortunate to have the use of a full size school (20x60). Once you have chosen a competition, make sure you send the entry off in plenty of time before the closing date to avoid disappointment. Once entered, set to work on a plan for the weeks leading up to it. Ask a friend to video you riding through the test about 3 weeks before. You can then see what you need to work on, it can sometimes look different to how it feels, it may even look better than you thought. Have another practice of the test a week before and a final practice and maybe get it videoed again a day or two before the competition. Do not keep riding the test through and

'You can learn a lot through watching back your test on video'

through, otherwise your horse may anticipate the next movement and do it before you give the aid. When you watch the video for the second time hopefully you will be able to see an improvement.

In the weeks leading up to the competition go and watch some dressage competitions, you can learn a lot through watching and secondly it will hopefully give you some inspiration to have a go, and will also show you how you and your horse

should be turned out. Remember that turn out is very important, as it is the first impression for the judge. Make sure you check what is and what is not allowed for example your horse can't wear boots and you must be wearing gloves. Take the BD Rule book with you, and read it!

Check your tack thoroughly. I am very lucky as I am sponsored by Prestige, they provide me with exceptional quality saddles and tack, but I will always ask them to check the fit and shape on the horse a few weeks before a big competition. When horses are in training the muscles develop, grow and move so it is important to check the fit of the saddle more regularly.

Make sure you know your test and the letters around the arena. The best way to remember the letters is to have a rhyme, and the first letter of each word is the order they come in around the arena. The one I use is 'All King Edwards Horses Can Manage Big Fences'. (This applies for a 20x40m arena) Draw out a rectangle with the letters on.

Write yourself out an equipment list and pack everything the day before so you're not desperately trying to find something on the morning of the competition. As well as equipment you need to make sure you have water and hay for your horse, and food and drink for yourself or check if there are refreshments available.

Remember to phone for your dressage times (normally two days before) check on the schedule for the day and times, sometimes if you miss phoning for your times you can lose your place.

'Smile as you go up the centre line to the judge, just think that you are competing for your own achievement to start, with not worrying where you are placed'

On the day, arrive in plenty of time. Work back from your time, how long you need to ride in, how long to get you and your horse ready. Time to watch a few tests as long as it's the one your doing otherwise it may confuse you. This also gives you an idea of the reaction that the horses are making to the surroundings, if there is something they are taking a dislike to you can try and get them past it from both ways before you have to start the test. Work out how long it's going to take to get there allowing for delays. Also arriving early you can get a feel of the place, know where everything is, like the toilets.

When riding in remember your rules to pass left to left, do

not walk or halt on the outside track, leave plenty of room when passing don't get too close behind another horse. Keep a check on the time. Remember to remove your horse's boots before the test. When you ride

around the arena allow the writer to see your number, there is a rule that states this! Smile as you go up the centre line to the judge just think that you are competing for your own achievement to start with not worrying where you are placed. If you happen to get placed then it's a bonus. An important factor is to remember to breathe. I recently went with someone who was doing their first test and I think they held their breath for the whole 3 and a half minutes of the test! With good preparation, riding your first dressage test should go smoothly, be less stressful and be a much more enjoyable experience so that you will be looking forward and planning for the next one.

NEXT MONTH... Andrew Gould shows you how to buy the perfect dressage horse.



Ultra Jazz and Andrew in 2007 at Addington. The pair won the Winter Regional Novice Music Championship

Competing in your first dressage test is a daunting experience, Andrew Gould explains his preparation routine and how to give yourself the best possible chance before you even enter the arena.



Jordan's Glamour Girl and Andrew performing at the Breast Cancer Campaign Charity Event in July 2008

Preparation is everything

By Andrew Gould



Riding a dressage test for the first time can be a daunting and nerve-racking experience, but if you are well prepared it won't seem such an ordeal. Remember that everyone who competes at dressage, had to begin by riding their first test. If you ask anyone about their first test, whether they were 6 or 60 they will probably say that they felt nervous and it is only with time that the nerves decrease. Although you will find that at each level you reach the nerves return, it is only when you become comfortable at a level that you begin to ride a test like you do when you are relaxed at home.

So where to start, find a low key local competition to enter. Look for one in about 4-6 weeks time. Find out what facilities the venue has, whether the competition is on grass or a surface, has it a fence around the arena or boards. It is a good idea to begin competing on a surface with a fence around you, especially for young or novice horses whose balance may not be well established. It will also help to give you and your horse more confidence. Look to see what tests they are running. You want to start with a test at prelim level, even if you are working above that level at home, but if you have purchased a horse that has previously competed at a higher level then you have to make sure that the