



# Dressage & Reining

## A Spectator's Guide

Two equestrian disciplines that look quite different actually are very much the same. **By Charmaine Carpenter**

**O**n the basis of looks alone, the equestrian sports of dressage and reining seem worlds apart. A dressage rider wears formal-looking attire—top hat, shadbelly and tall boots—while the horse is outfitted in a black dressage saddle and double bridle. In reining, riders wear classic cowboy clothing—jeans, chaps, a cowboy hat—and the horse is tacked up in a hand-tooled Western saddle and bridle. Appearances, however, can be deceiving. Despite some obvious differences, dressage and reining are very much alike.

And both can be intriguing to watch, especially when you know what to look for. Here's a rundown of what's involved in both sports to make you an educated spectator.

### Working origins

**R**eining as an equestrian discipline came from the ranch horse. Cowboys, who used skills such as sliding stops, spins, cir-

cles at different speeds and rollbacks in their daily work, gathered every month or so to show off their best ranch horses. Reining maneuvers in the showring are movements born directly from the cowboys' need to have a pleasant and reliable equine partner. The best reining horses were those who could be ridden with just one hand so the rider could use his other hand for work. These same horses also possessed the ability to immediately respond to a rider's request during a potentially hazardous situation; any hesitation jeopardized the well-being of the horse, the rider and, most likely, the cattle in their care. Eventually, the informal reining competitions became a popular Western event, which was recognized by the American Quarter Horse Association in 1949. In 1966, the National Reining Horse Association was formed to govern what had become a growing sport.

In contrast, the history of dressage dates back much further, with the first written text appearing in 1500 BC. A training technique as well as a competitive event, dressage develops a horse's physique and obedience using gymnastic exercises. As in reining, a horse whose abilities make him suitable for dressage work always has been valued. Originally, the dressage horse's work was in the cavalry, where a horse needed to be trained to react to his rider's every command for success in battle. In the 17th century, dressage became part of proper education for young noblemen in Europe, and by 1912 it was included as one of the events in the Olympic Games.



## Horses in motion

One quality that separates reining horses from their dressage counterparts is their ability to turn movements on and off. On the ranch, the reining horse could stand in a relaxed position, conserving his energy, for hours. Yet he was prepared to engage in the most demanding work at any given moment.

A reiner focuses on communicating with his horse by using his seat and back. He does not have constant contact with his horse's mouth. Instead, he rides on a loose rein, holding both reins in one hand. Often, the reins are held in the "off" hand, which started from cowboys working on the ranch needing their stronger hand free to perform other tasks, like opening gates or roping cattle.

Although softness and bending are taught to both reining and dressage horses, the loose rein used with reining horses requires less body frame and, therefore, less bend. Reiners teach their horses to be in a frame in collection, but not quite as much as dressage horses.

Here's how dressage Olympian Lendon Gray explains the differences: "Dressage horses compare to someone going to the gym to work out intensely for an hour," she says. "You couldn't possibly go around in a dressage frame all day. It is a completely developed athletic skill. The reining horse and rider are more like the nine-to-five worker, who may need to use some of the skill learned at the gym from time to time, but who can go through the day on a loose rein, knowing he can call on his athleticism if needed."

A dressage horse has a higher, rounder stride and constantly maintains power and impulsion. He holds an athletic frame in performance, and his rider maintains constant contact with his mouth. "Dressage riders work to regulate every single stride, whereas reiners find a tempo and stay there," Gray says.

The horses that excel in each discipline often differ in type. Reining horses typically are about 15 hands and strong-coupled. Quarter Horses are quite successful in performing reining maneuvers,

but horses of other breeds also excel.

Dressage horses are somewhat longer-bodied and higher-necked than reining horses, but they, too, come from a variety of backgrounds. "Any well-balanced, correct-moving horse can achieve dressage movements," Gray says.

### More similar than different

Regardless of size or breed, dressage and reining horses must have the desire and ability to excel in the execution of precise movements as prompted by a rider's aids. In dressage and reining, top riders and their horses seem to move as one, without evidence of effort by horse or rider.

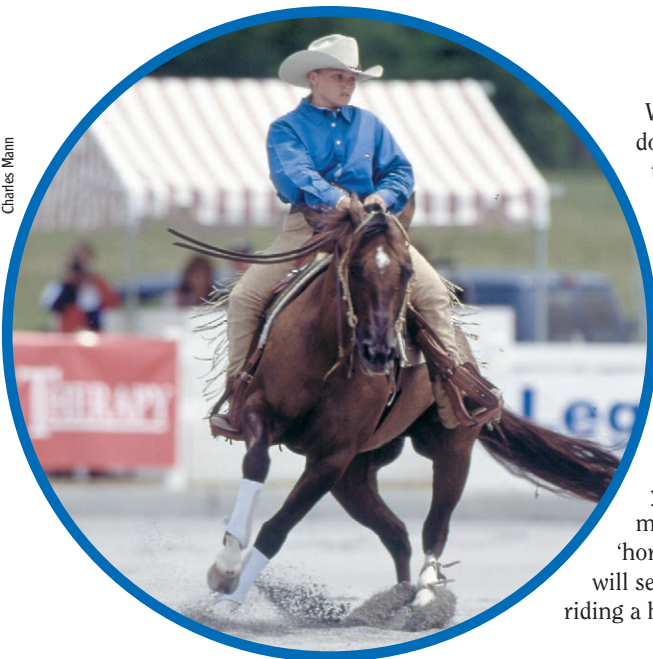
"At the canter, a reining horse should be driving from his hock with a rounded back that is on the tip of his rider's fingers, waiting for the next command," says World Champion reiner Brian Dygert. "He and his rider should appear pleased and relaxed and look as if they are one. No matter the physical exertion, the horse should appear to move effortlessly."

Interestingly, but not coincidentally, Gray's description of what's expected from a dressage horse echoes Dygert's. "He should be bending his joints considerably and have tremendous sustained power. His hocks and stifles should bend so he moves from underneath, but his back should be relaxed. Similar to the reining horse, at the slightest suggestion he should be prepared to compact, extend or bend his round, open stride."



Reining competitors  
Shawn Florida and  
Zan Freckles Hickory

Charles Mann



Mandy McCutcheon and  
Mr. Tori Kid

When all is said and done, Dygert says that riding of any type is about fundamental control. "In reality, the function of riding a horse is the same no matter what equestrian discipline you prefer," he explains. "If you look up the meaning of the word 'horsemanship,' you will see it is 'the art of riding a horse.'"

"Before," adds Gray, "there was the perception that Western riders were rough-riding cowboys, and dressage riders were a bunch of snobs. We have a lot to learn from each other."

And one way that Gray and Dygert have proved that is by performing together. "I wanted to show that dressage could be fun, and reiners had a high level of education that produced beautiful horses," Gray says. "The perceptions have been flip-flopped: Most people thought of reining as fun and dressage as a sport that produces highly educated, beautiful horses. In fact, the basics of good training, no matter the discipline or horse, are alike, even if, after a time, we all branch out and specialize.

"Anyone who really wants to become the best horseman he can, should learn about other people's methods of schooling," Gray adds. "It is always good to work with others who are successful in their field, because, after all, these are the same animals." 🌐

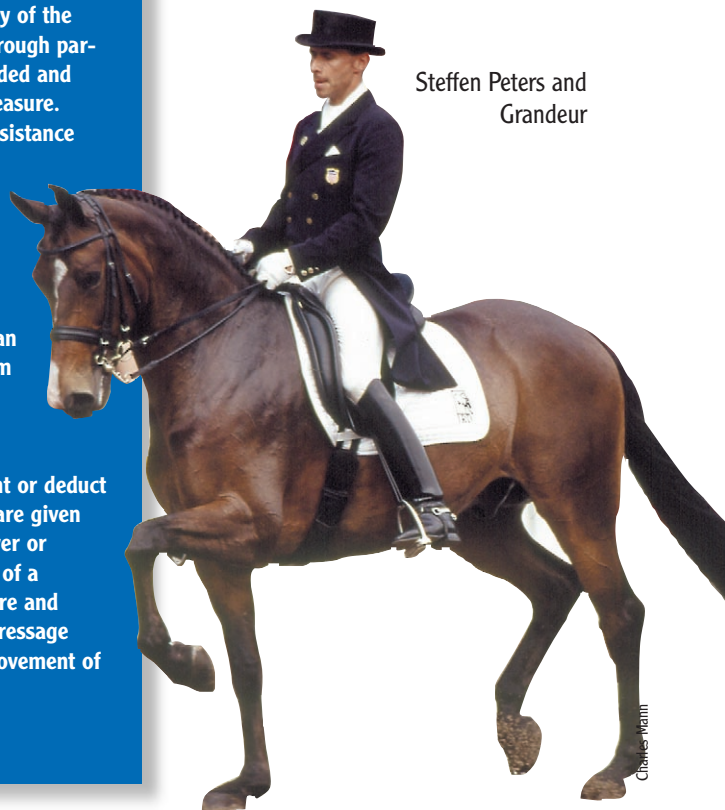
*This article is excerpted with permission from "Dressage & Reining: Not So Different," published in the May 2000 issue of Dressage Today. For additional information on Dressage Today, write to 656 Quince Orchard Rd., #600, Gaithersburg, MD 20878; telephone: (301) 977-3900; or direct e-mail to dtletters@aol.com.*

## Scoring Comparisons

In the competition arena, dressage horses perform a set of movements and are judged on how well they do them. Similarly, reining horses are judged on specific movements, mastery of the prescribed maneuvers and attitude as they are guided through particular patterns. The reining horse should be willfully guided and not resist, so the picture presented is one of ease and pleasure. As with dressage, reining horses are penalized for any resistance in the showing.

Dressage riders perform particular tests according to their level of expertise. Reining riders are asked to perform one of 10 standard patterns among a group of riders at a similar level. Freestyles make up a separate division. Skill levels are prescribed from beginning level to U.S. Equestrian Team qualifying levels. A judge can choose any one of the patterns for participants to perform prior to a class.

Reiners and horses are scored in half graduations. All participants enter the ring with a score of 70, and it goes up or down from there. The judge may add one point or deduct a half point for a specific maneuver. In dressage, scores are given by judges in percentages, yet, as in reining, each maneuver or movement is judged, and the final score reflects the skill of a series of movements. While reiners start with a good score and must maintain or increase it to end with a good result, dressage riders must earn high points for each required part or movement of a test to achieve a pleasing end percentage.



Steffen Peters and  
Grandeur

Charles Mann