

Scribing 101

Learn this volunteer skill and you can claim a front-row seat for watching and learning about dressage

BY SHARON BIGGS



TECHNICAL AND TRADITIONAL: An electronic scorer (left) and a traditional scribe on the job with judge Jo Graham at Dressage at Devon (PA)

Volunteers are the backbone of any horse show, but there is one position that is essential to every dressage competition: the scribe. A scribe is a judge's assistant, responsible for recording the marks and comments and noting any errors so that the judge can watch the entire test unimpeded.

"It only takes a blink of an eye to miss something, even with a scribe," says Maureen van Tuyl, of San Jose, CA, a USEF "R" dressage technical delegate and a veteran scribe who has sat ringside at the 1996 Olympics and other international competitions. "I scribed at the European Dressage Championships several years ago in England. [Top German pair] Ulla Salzgeber and Rusty were doing an extended canter across the diagonal that looked like it would earn an 8 or 9. Right at the end, Rusty flipped his lead a few times. All the judges gave it a 4, apart from one who gave it a 9! It happened so fast, and somehow she just didn't see it."

Why Scribe?

Besides the satisfaction of knowing you're doing your part to give back to the sport, there are plenty of selfish reasons for learning to scribe, according to van Tuyl.

"It's the best seat in the house," she says, "especially at the top level, because there aren't that many comments from the judges, so you can watch quite a bit. But even at the lower levels, where you can only watch a little of the ride, you will still catch a lot. Scribing is really educational. You learn what the judges are looking for, what they reward, and what they want the competitors to improve."

"When you show, you get your own feedback; but when you scribe, you get to listen to what the judge says at every level. It gives you an idea of how judges judge, how they arrive at this score, and what they are looking for," says former USDF Region 1 director Alison Head, of Hamilton, VA, a USEF "R" judge pursuing her "S" who scribed at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games in Kentucky. "At WEG I was able to watch sixty-five horses at that international level, which was a big learning experience for me."

A Scribe's Duties

The essence of a scribe's job is to be a deft and accurate note-taker who can record the numbers correctly and write down all or most of the judge's comments. Test movements occur in rapid succession, so many scribes use a form of shorthand to keep the writing to a minimum (see "Suggested Scribing Abbreviations" on page 40 for examples).

"A good scribe will help the judge stay on track, help them keep up with the test, point out if they've missed a



FRONT ROW CENTER: Alison Head (center) scribes for Stephen Clarke (right), head of the ground jury for the Grand Prix Special at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games

score, or let the judge know if the rider has gone off course," says Head. "It's actually easier to scribe at the highest levels of international competition because the riders are so skilled that judges tend to give fewer comments. At the World Cup Dressage Final, I remember [British FEI 5* judge] Stephen Clarke saying, 'I'm not going to tell Anky van Grunsven how to ride; she knows how!' Judges will make comments as something goes wrong, but it's a little bit different from the lower levels, where judges may need to offer more help to the riders. However, the expectation of the scribe is greater at the higher levels: You have to know what you are doing and be able to keep up."

Do's and Don'ts of Scribing

The scribe's job is to assist the judge. Be helpful and friendly, but do not enter into conversation with the judge after a test has begun. After the class or during breaks, the judge may welcome your questions or be happy to chat. However, never question or dispute a judge's marks or comments.

As the scribe, you'll be given a stack of test sheets for the class, each usually pre-labeled with a competitor's name and show number. As the ride proceeds, follow the numbered movements on the sheet with a finger so you stay with the test and the judge. Listen carefully to the judge's comments, and write legibly. Some judges give the score first and then the comment; others do the reverse. Judges often prep scribes by explaining their procedure before the class commences.

You're welcome to use the suggested abbreviations listed in the "USDF Guide for Scribes" (sidebar), but don't worry about adhering to them slavishly, advises van Tuyl. "Write what is shortest for you and what makes sense," she says. "Don't write too big or you won't have room. Start at the top of the box if you have a wordy judge." ➔

Suggested Scribing Abbreviations

From the "USDF Guide for Scribes," here is a sampling of abbreviations and symbols commonly used by dressage scribes.

@	at
cad	cadence
CL, cntr, c-line	center line
f/hand, 4hd	forehand
gd	good
lack imp	lacks impulsion
<	less
>	more
lg	large
outs	outside
rhy	rhythm
sh/in, sh-in	shoulder-in
str	straight
□	square
unstd hed	unsteady head
tran ↑	up transition.

Write the score in the left-hand column of the score sheet. You don't need to do the math to calculate the score for coefficient movements (the show scorer will take care of that) unless the judge asks you to. If the competitor goes off course or incurs some other kind of error, print ERROR in big letters to the left of the score box for the movement in question and circle the word. Don't write down the number of points to be deducted; but at the conclusion of the test, note the total number of errors at the bottom of the test. Three errors result in elimination, so ask the judge what he wants you to write in this case.

If you mess up, fess up! "The worst thing is when the scribe makes a mistake and doesn't say anything," says Head. "The judge suddenly discovers that the scribe has been off the entire time. It's easier to correct a mistake as it happens. Judges will try to help an inexperienced scribe by saying: box one, the comment, the score, and then box two and so on. Ask your judge at the beginning of the show what their method is."

As van Tuyl's story about the judge who failed to note Rusty's mistakes in the flying changes illustrates, even top judges can miss a mistake. Even if you think you saw something that the judge missed, don't point it out.

Discretion is an important part of being a trusted scribe. "Don't discuss a horse or rider with the judge," says van Tuyl.

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“And don’t repeat what you’ve heard outside the judge’s box. People always ask me what the judge thought about their horse, and I just tell them to read their test.”

At the conclusion of the test, finish writing the judge’s final score and comments and then hand over the test sheet so that the judge can record the scores and comments for the collective marks and then sign the test. Place the completed test sheets aside, in order, until a runner comes by to pick them up.

Don’t talk while the judge is writing the collectives and final comments. If you have a question about something, wait until it is quiet between rides and then politely ask.

“Ninety-nine percent of judges are quite pleasant and fun to work with, but they do like competent assistance,” says van Tuyl. “Don’t be afraid or overawed. If you make a mistake, the two of you will figure it out. Volunteer to scribe every chance you get. You’ll meet some very interesting people, and you’ll learn a lot.”

A Day in the Life

You’ve volunteered to scribe for the first time, and you’re excited and a little nervous. Here’s what to expect, plus some tips for making the day go smoothly.

Dress in neat, comfortable clothes appropriate to the weather and the event. (Jeans and sneakers may be fine for

Digital Edition Bonus Content



Read about Alison Head’s experiences scribing at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games in Kentucky.

a low-key schooling show, but a prestigious CDI or other major show probably requires more of a “business casual” look.) Bring sunblock, sunglasses, a hat, a lap blanket, or an extra coat. If the weather may be changeable, dress in layers. Arrive at least 30 minutes before the start of the first class to which you’ve been assigned to check in with show management or the volunteer coordinator. The appropriate person in charge will hand you your materials (or tell you that they’re in the judge’s box) and tell you what ring you’ll be in and which judge you’ll be scribing for.

Page through the test sheets to make sure they match the order of go. Look over the day sheet or show program to see if there are any scratches or substitutions, which may continue to occur as the show proceeds, particularly in bad weather or toward the end of the final day of competition. If a test sheet has not been provided for a rider who’s not on

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Resources for Scribes

The "USDF Guide for Scribes" is a concise reference containing an extensive list of popular scribing abbreviations and symbols. Download it at usdf.org/docs/ShowFlash/web/generalinfo/before/guideforscribes.pdf.

There are plenty of opportunities to learn more about scribing and to gain scribing experience. Many USDF group-member organizations (GMOs) hold "learn to scribe" volunteer-training sessions. If you're nervous about scribing at a "real show," volunteer to scribe for a USDF "L" Education Program participant or at a "ride a test" clinic.

the roster of competitors, there should be a blank sheet in the box that you can use.

When you arrive at the designated judge's box, test your pens to make sure they work. Check that the box is outfitted with everything the judge needs, such as a bell or a whistle, a stopwatch (if you'll be scribing for a freestyle), and extra copies of the test in case the judge needs to follow one. Judges often like to keep a running tally of their scores, so ask show management for an extra day sheet if one has not been provided. If there's any breeze, make sure you're

supplied with enough clipboards or weighty rocks to keep all papers pinned down.

When the judge arrives, introduce yourself. If the judge doesn't volunteer her preferred method of working, ask.

When the first competitor enters and begins riding around the outside of the arena, check to make sure that the horse's number matches that on the test sheet. If the sheet isn't labeled, record the competitor's number in the appropriate box in the right-hand corner. If a rider doesn't show, write "no show" on the test sheet and put it in the pile of completed tests.

As the test unfolds, the most important thing is to get the score. "The comment is important, but the score is vital," says Head. "If you don't get the whole comment, you can ask for clarification later. Try not to interrupt the judge, but make a check mark next to the movement to remind you. If you didn't hear the score, or if the judge forgot to give it, ask right away while it's fresh in the judge's mind. Scores include decimal points now, such as 7.5. So if a judge gives a whole number, such as 7, it must be marked 7.0."

After the final halt and salute, ensure that every box on the test sheet contains a score. If the judge wants any changes, make sure that she has crossed out the original score, entered the new mark, and then initialed the change. After the judge has finished recording the collective marks

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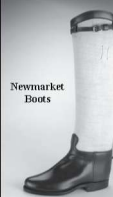
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and comments and has signed the test, put the completed sheet in with any others awaiting pickup by a runner and check the ride off on your day sheet. At the end of the class, take any remaining tests back to the show office. Never leave completed tests unattended.

An Eye-Opening Experience

As van Tuyl and Head have explained, scribing can be a fun and educational experience with a lot to teach the volunteer about dressage showing and judging. For an experienced scribe, working at a big show and seeing famous horses and riders up close can be thrilling and memorable.

At the same time, scribing reminds us that judges are human, and showing always contains an element of subjectivity. Seeing how the inevitable little glitches—weather changes, equipment problems, momentary lapses in attention—affect competitors' tests helps to demystify the showing experience and, ideally, helps scribes to empathize with the people on both sides of "C." ▲

Sharon Biggs is the author of In One Arena: Top Dressage Experts Share Their Knowledge Through the Levels and The Complete Horse Bible. She is a dressage trainer based in northwest Indiana and a former Civil Service Club trainer at the Royal Mews in Buckingham Palace.

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