

Dressage Test Memorization Tips & Tricks

by Jessie Paine

I have a two-step process for test memorization: first, I memorize the test itself and how I want to ride then test. Second, I use visualization techniques to practice my ideal test.

Memorizing seems pretty straight forward: pick it up, read it, memorize it. But you are a competitor and you've got to memorize tests in the most useful way possible to achieve two objectives: it must be easy to recall when under stress, and you must ride the test well. To do this you've got to make the test your own.

The not-so-old fashioned way: OK, yes, you probably should start by just picking up the test and reading it. I prefer to do this with the EquiTest Ap on my iPhone. There's an interactive diagram so you can read the pattern and see it at the same time. It's a great benefit to have a visual of what direction you are going! It's a terrible feeling to think you are following the instructions properly only to read: "C - canter RIGHT lead" and you thought at this point you were supposed to be tracking left!

Use your own language: this is important for a couple reasons. First, it's easier to remember something that is familiar rather than something that is foreign. If the terms *travers* and *renvers* cause you a moment of contemplation, then just think *haunches-in*, *haunches-out*. This is not a spelling bee or foreign language quiz; it's a dressage test pattern that you are to perform, not write out 20 times on a chalkboard.

Second, it's easier to remember something that is concise rather than lengthy. Instead of memorizing the test verbatim I memorize the test in terms that are quick and easy. For example, in Fourth Level Test 3, there's a very tricky counter canter sequence. The test reads: R-I half circle right 10m, I-S half circle left 10m; E flying change of lead, then you repeat this going the other direction. In my head I refer to the above mentioned canter sequence with just four words: *squiggle, squiggle, straight, change*.

Memorize the movement, not the letter: We aren't in a spelling bee, so it doesn't really matter if you correctly remember that the medium trot after your salute is M-X-K or H-X-F. As long as you turned the correct direction off of centerline, you know the medium trot is on the long diagonal. Mixing up the letters is too easy, and memorizing the specific letters can be an unnecessary stumbling block, particularly when you haven't slept in

three days, are wearing a blazer, tall boots and a helmet in the middle of a blazing summer, bordering on severe dehydration, all whilst sitting on your horse who is making every effort to play equine twister or charades. Self-doubt is self-sabotage, so don't allow the opportunity for doubt to creep in!

Rather than focus on the specific letter, I generalize them into three categories: corner letters (M, K, H, F), middle letters (E, B) and funny letters (R, S, V, P). "Funny letters" sounds a little ridiculous, but it is permanently engrained in my brain thanks to my mentor. And it always produces a smile when I first say it to a new student, so that's a bonus!

The outlines: once you are familiar with the test, sit down and write out YOUR test, as opposed to THE test. Write two outlines. The first, your long outline, will include a lot of detail and the important corrections your trainer has been so gently whispering (or enthusiastically yelling) in your ear for months. The second outline should be extremely brief and probably committed to memory so if you suddenly find yourself lost in the test you can quickly find your course by running through your short outline.

The long outline: details, details! This outline helps you memorize *how* to ride the test. You'll add in basic reminders that will make the difference between a good test and a great test, like: *suppling corners*, *half-halts*, *preparation for movements*, and of course, *breathing!* Discuss with your trainer what you have to remember for specific movements. For example: *outside leg gently hugging your horse's side in 10 meter circles so as to not lose the haunches*; *a little extra flexion then shoulder-fore in the corner prior to the left half-pass*; *three half-halts prior to your canter-walk transition*; or *relax your hips when you transition from free walk to medium walk*, etc. If you tend to breeze past your corners then include every corner in your detailed outline. Every time you write the word "halt" include "immobility, breath."

Think of how to best ride the movements. Don't give away points. For example, in a canter zig-zag you must have a stride of straightness prior to the change, but it's so tempting to throw the horse's shoulders over and get to the wall ASAP. So although it's not specified in the test itself, include a stride of straightness in your outline: *half-pass left, straight, change*; *half-pass right, straight, change*.

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For the 4-3 movement mentioned above, my short outline is: “squiggle, squiggle, straight, change.” My long outline goes something like this: bend and engagement in corner, rebalancing half-halt, weight on inside sitting bone, outside leg gently back to prepare for counter canter, inside leg to outside receiving aids, rebalancing half-halt, half 10 M circle, look up (!!!), moment of straightness, rebalance, half 10 M circle, inside sitting bone, outside leg gently present but clear, outside rein connected, inside sitting bone, straight on long side, half-halt, rebalance, flying change, rebalance, shoulder-fore. Your long outline is your personal roadmap on how to ride every stride, because every stride counts.

Include in your outline what you plan to do while circling the arena waiting for the bell. Plan what you will do if you have just one go around the arena, or if you have a few minutes. Do you need to leg yield your horse to keep her relaxed, or do you need to rev up your sleepy gelding with frequent transitions? Without this plan you could find yourself stressed or distracted immediately prior to your test, and then you may be more likely to forget the test. If you have a horse who can be a little spooky, discuss with your trainer how you should approach the judge’s box – in what gait, which direction first, etc. If you are preparing for Regionals, include in your outline handing off your whip to a friend prior to circling the ring for your championship class!

So now you have your short and long outlines and a roadmap of how you are going to ride the test to the best of your ability. Now it is time to practice.

Practice, practice, practice! Ride the test a 100 times – but only once or twice on your horse! We’ve all been warned by our trainers: don’t drill the test with your horse. Keep the horse fresh to your aids, so that he will anticipate that you will ask a question of him, but not anticipate what that question will be or go on auto-pilot. But, you are memorizing the test so you can perform it with exactitude, and you’ve got to practice riding it, not just reciting it. So, if you can’t practice your test while on your horse, how do you practice? You ride the test in your mind’s eye.

I’ve worked a lot with Laura King, a certified hypnotherapist who specializes in equestrian sports. Laura introduced me to the art of visualization.

Personally I visualize in vivid color. I also visualize in two ways: first, as a spectator like I am watching a movie screen, and second, as the rider.

I start by playing a movie in my mind from the perspective of my coach watching my horse and I ride the test. I look at my position, my horse’s posture, the engagement of his hind legs, the height of his poll, the angle of his shoulder-in, the lift of the withers in the changes, and the reach of his shoulders in the extensions. I make small corrections, signaling in my mind things that I have to remember on the day of the test.

Second, I visualize the test from my viewpoint on the day of the show – from in the saddle. I want to summon every detail – the sounds of birds, the breeze, feel the reins in my hands and the balls of my feet on the irons, and visualize his neck out in front of me. I then ride the test in my mind’s eye and ride every single stride from going around the arena to the final salute. Sometimes when I am doing this I find myself gently rocking back and forth in my horse’s rhythm.

You can practice your test by visualization everywhere (but not while driving please!). Start by riding your test once every night before you go to bed. If you do this one month before the show then you’ll have ridden the test 30 times before pulling into the show grounds! Practice in different environments so you train your mind to focus on your test, and not the distractions around you. When I was an attorney I would ride through a test in my mind every morning and evening when I was on the subway going to and from work.

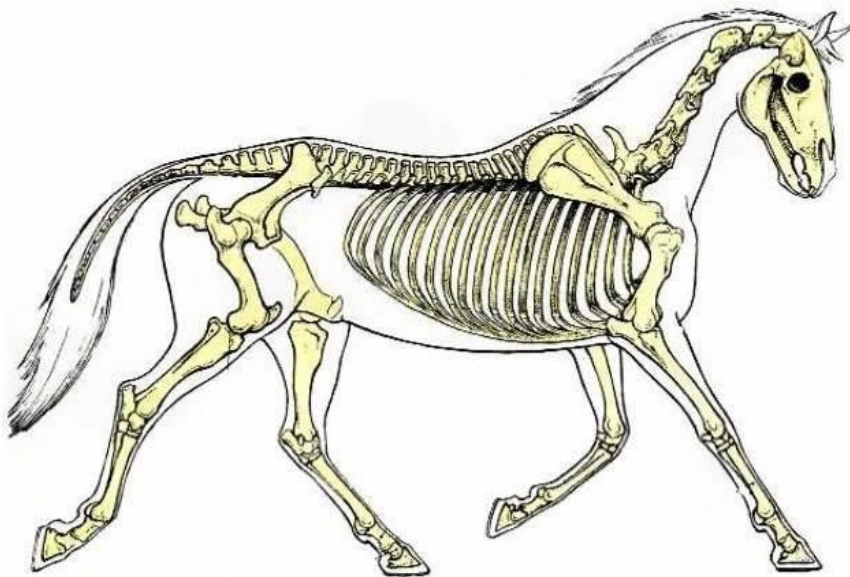
At the show I make a point to sit down and run through the test once more in my mind prior to warming up. Since I am at the show and am familiar with the environment I can visualize the specific arena I will be riding in, what I am wearing, and what the weather is like, to make it all the more real.

When you really think you’ve mastered your test, try picking it up mid-way. Rather than starting down centerline, start at the walk work, or mid-way through the canter. This is surprisingly challenging, and it’s important, because if you forget where you are going when riding the actual test, it likely won’t happen at the beginning.

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Enjoy it. We all forget things – forget to turn the TV off, forget to put away a bridle, forget to pack an extra pair of white breeches – it happens. And it is bound to happen in your dressage test at some time or another. If and when this happens – remain calm. You don't get mad at yourself for forgetting to turn the TV off, so don't get mad at yourself for forgetting a movement or getting confused. If you allow that to happen, one moment of forgetfulness can ruin the rest of your test due to tension and distraction. Just smile, breath, quickly recall your short outline in your head, and enjoy the rest of the ride.

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