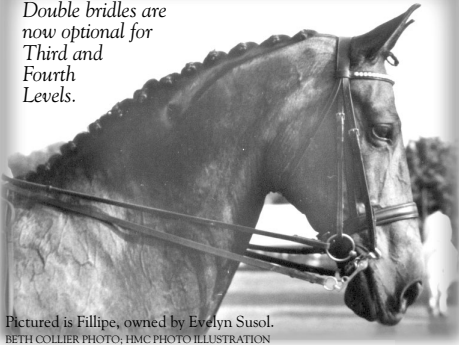


Double bridles are now optional for Third and Fourth Levels.



Pictured is Fillipe, owned by Evelyn Susol.
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THE DOUBLE BRIDLE IS IT A COP OUT?

By Elizabeth Madlener

To the delight of many dressage competitors, it is now permissible to ride with the double bridle at third level. At the same time that this rule went into effect, the USEA fifth level tests were eliminated. The fifth level tests were similar to the FEI tests but permitted horses to be shown in a plain snaffle bridle (the double bridle is mandatory in FEI tests).

Although seemingly innocuous changes, in actuality they reflect a marked shift in the fundamental philosophy of those who provide the leadership—and therefore make the rules—in the world of competitive dressage in the United States. Traditionally, the use of the double bridle has been considered “inappropriate” as a training tool. The snaffle has been regarded by purists as the correct bit for developing a horse through the levels of dressage training until the horse was close to being “finished.” At that time the double bridle was introduced to the horse only to enhance the training. The theory has been that the purpose of the double bridle was not to “make” the horse but to polish his work.

Unlike the double, the action of the snaffle aids in the development of lateral suppleness. The snaffle bit also is quite adequate to develop collection and to make the horse honestly “through” (working from his hindquarters, over the back, and into the bit.) However, the action of the curb does promote the highest degree of engagement, the utmost articulation of the joints of the hind limbs that is possible from an individual horse. This is the “polish” that the double bridle brings to the training, and thus why in the past horses were not permitted to

compete in a double bridle until fourth level, also known as the “pre FEI” level. Obviously, this dynamic has no relationship to the use of the double bridle to control a horse or to force him to carry his head in a position to suggest that he is on the bit.

Of course, this begs the question of why, if a horse can perform a correct Grand Prix on a snaffle, is it mandatory to ride FEI tests in a double bridle?

The view of the FEI is that acceptance of the double bridle demonstrates the full acceptance of the bit by the horse. When the horse works happily in the double bridle, he is considered to be in perfect harmony with the rider, in front of the leg and in easy self-carriage. He clearly is accepting of the bit, allowing the curb to engage him to the fullest extent while remaining entirely supple laterally even with the limited influence from the snaffle rein.

Aren't we lowering our standards?

Does the removal of the 5th level tests and the sanctioning of the double bridle at third level indicate the United States is lowering its standards for dressage training by condoning early use of the double bridle and eliminating the encouragement to train a horse to Grand Prix on the snaffle alone? No.

The deletion of the 5th level tests actually says nothing philosophically because these tests were rarely offered in prize lists and less often taken advantage of by riders. Practically speaking, they have been absent for a long time.

Regarding the double bridle, the FEI has already set this precedent by requiring a double bridle in the FEI Junior Rider tests. These tests, generally, have a third level difficulty.

There are two primary reasons for allowing the double into competition one level lower than in the past: a recognition of the profile of the majority of riders in competition today and a consideration for well being for the horse.

The majority of riders of today, unlike those in the first half of the 20th century when dressage was introduced as a competitive sport, are amateurs with limited time and resources to dedicate to years of training. Many riders must resort to a “catch as catch can” training regimen using clinics, perhaps weekly lessons, sometimes professional training, lots of reading, and involvement in USDF sponsored programs to become educated riders.

To a large extent these are the riders who compete at third level. These tests are designed to indicate whether the horse is ready to begin the final stages of his training. At third level, the horse performs all of the lateral work and is required to do walk pirouettes (a precursor to the piaffe), flying changes (an indication that he is over the back), collection at the canter to demonstrate a readiness for canter pirouettes, and—most importantly—a level of collection that gives the horse enough confidence and ability to extend fully at the trot and canter.

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The thinking is that through the use of the stronger bit, riders will become more confident to allow the horse to come into collection. With this kind of confidence, more competitors will be riding the horse “back to front” into a hand that seeks to balance the horse rather than to restrict him.

The third level is pivotal regarding the success of further training because at this level the horse must be able to sustain collection and easily maintain self-carriage into, during, and after the extended paces. Unbalanced, overly restricted horses rarely develop the

engagement necessary to perform the upper level movements with lightness and fluidity. If promotion of an earlier use of the double bridle does generate a lighter hand and true engagement, judges should begin to see true collection and less resistance. More horses will be able to be developed to the fullest extent of dressage training and capable of performing the Grand Prix. Most importantly, though, we should begin to see happier horses and more harmony between horse and rider.

Wouldn't earlier use of Double Bridles encourage more false frames?

The double bridle cannot force something that the horse has not the strength to do. It cannot “make” the horse collect any more than we can be forced to perform some gymnastic stunt without being physically ready. A horse forced into an appearance of being “on the bit” is in actuality balancing on his shoulders and is to some extent behind the aids.

To those who despair and think that the “dumbing down of America” has reached the dressage ring, it is perhaps encouraging to remember that the double bridle used to be called a “full” bridle and has been routinely used in the hunt field, polo, and casual hacking. If the thinking of those who design our national tests and the implementation of the double bridle earlier in a horse's training does encourage riders to have more confidence to ride correctly, then, perhaps, there will be a dwindling of the use of devices to force a horse into the appearance of a dressage horse. Should that kind of thinking develop in this country, the test designers will have been proven to be very wise indeed. ■

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