

Top Tips to prepare your horse or pony for a dressage competition



by Kristy Renae Jarvis,
Dynamik Stallions
Written for HYGAIN

In the lead up to a dressage competition, the preparation from the normal work routine varies from horse to horse. I believe that it is always better to have the horse training at the level above what you are competing at, having the work established not only gives the horse confidence but also the rider.

The key to a happy horse is to get out of the dressage arena and take to the bridle trails, a track or even a nice ride out in a big grass field for a change. Whilst this is important as part of your regular work program, it is most valuable in the week leading up to a competition.

With the more laid-back horse that can run out of energy, I make the work session the day before the competition much shorter involving the usual stretching warmup phase, running through some movements from the test in competition frame and checking that the horse has a good reaction to the aids by being quick off the leg and responding to the half halts. For a more sensitive or reactive horse, a normal work session may be necessary. Planning the lead up to the competition of course is always easier with a seasoned horse that you have competed many times as you can work out the best plan.

A young horse of course can be harder to prepare for their first competition. Training tests and protocol days can be an excellent way to really get to know the young horse and give it confidence before you have the pressure of an official dressage test to tackle. For a young horse or a hot horse, a light lunge at the competition or even at home can be enough to take the edge off and deal with any excitement or tension before you climb on board. For the young horse having a good stable and solid connection to the bridle established at home before you start competing helps the horse to feel confident. When you go out with a good connection to the bridle that makes them feel that they can trust you to guide them and help them deal with the atmosphere.

One of the most important factors on the day of the competition, I believe is that you can't fix things on the day! Don't get yourself or your horse overly tense pushing a weakness of a movement in the warmup. If it's not established at home or there are some minor issues with that movement you can't correct it there and then on the day. For a seasoned competition horse, I basically work out my competition warmup time based on how long it takes me to "warm up" at home during a training session. I do not believe in working a horse for an hour or more before a test. In my opinion, most horses only need 20 to 30 minutes warmup. To me the warmup is exactly as its states, a chance to get the horses joints moving and the muscles warmed up. This is a chance to make sure that you get the horse going nicely into the bridle and check the reactions to the aids. Even for an FEI test my warm up is fairly basic, the horse should already know the work. Check the basics, is the horse listening to the half halt and coming back when you ask? Is the horse moving straight off the leg aid or do you need to sharpen the reaction? You may run through a few movements to check how the horse is reacting but my advice is don't overdo it.

Of course, in the case of the hotter horse or one that is inexperienced you might take more time for your warm up and if possible make some relaxing walk breaks in between. The key is getting to know your horse to make the most effective warm up plan for the competition.

My horses have regular body work as part of their maintenance as competition horses. There are many options with bownen, massage, myofascial release work, veterinary chiropractor and acupuncture. I believe that this is an essential part of maintaining your horse to be competitive both now and for the long term as muscle and chiropractic issues will inhibit your horse's ability to move in a free and straight going way. Give your horse the best chance to make a good job for you. I try to ensure that my horses are checked leading up to a competition but I think planning when the treatment occurs is essential. Try to avoid having the body work done on your horse the day before a competition as if any changes are made you need to give the horse and yourself a chance to feel these changes in the horse's body. Take the time to assess how your horse feels and to create an awareness of when things are not quite right. Your horse is an athlete and needs to be taken care of to perform to the best of their ability.



From a grooming aspect, I like to use a rubber curry comb on my horses every day as part of the preparation for their work. This is not only beneficial to get some circulation happening but is great for the horse's skin and coat health. Then using a brush with natural bristles is the best to remove all the dirt and dust before tacking up.

Using a conditioning mane and tail spray on a regular basis helps keep the tangles away and the hair in good condition. It is important every day to also clean the hooves before you ride and applying a natural hoof grease is important to prevent dehydration of the hoof. I like to keep the saddle and bridle path maintained and trimmed regularly and of course it's important to ensure that your horse is neatly trimmed up in the days leading up to a competition.

The day before the competition we shampoo and condition the ponies. I believe in using a shampoo and conditioner that is manufactured for horses and not using human products because people have a different skin PH to horses. Human skin has a PH of 5.5 whereas horses have a skin PH of around 7. In order to ensure that the horses skin and coat don't dry out or get itchy, using a good quality horse brand of shampoo product is essential. We use Platinum Pony products as they are made with Natural ingredients and are the most highly effective products for whitening, brightening and conditioning.

I prefer my horses to be plaited up the night before the competition. There are options to have professional people come and plait your horse these days. The other option if you want to improve on your plaiting presentation is to attend a workshop. Even if there are enough hours free on the morning of the event to plait, I prefer my horses to be able to get some hours out in the paddock before loading them on the truck to go to an event. If the competition is early, we make sure they at least go out for half an hour no matter how early the start!

To help reduce stress and workload, I recommend that you have a separate grooming kit that is always packed and ready to go with all the essentials you may need and then you never have to worry about forgetting things. Have an organised system for packing your show gear. Clean all your gear with a good quality saddle soap or glycerine if there is a lot of build-up on the leather. A small amount of leather shine products can be used for your long boots and to shine bridles. Remember that good presentation shows respect to the dressage judges and makes you feel good before you start riding.

If you have multiple tests and especially if you are competing multiple horses, make a list of your tests, their start times, what time you want to be on to warmup for each test and what arena you will be in for that test. Being organised is key to helping reduce stress for the rider. Arrive with plenty of time to settle your horse and give yourself time to get prepared. There is nothing worse than rushing to get ready on time as this does not help you focus and remember your test. Sometimes success comes with hindsight, so never be disheartened when things don't go to plan, just take it as part of the learning curve.

