

SHOW/CIRCUIT: What is your own background in horses? When did dressage begin to interest you?

Julia Fraser: I'm originally from Wales, in the UK, and horses were a part of everyday life. There was always a horse somewhere nearby, whether it was the draught horses on the farm or the milk cart ponies in London. I can't remember not being interested in them.

When my family moved to New Zealand, we lived on the North Shore. There were other kids riding but a lot of them had quite beautiful show ponies. Mine was quite ordinary in comparison. However, when I rode my first dressage test at a one day event, I discovered that this average looking pony could be quite competitive.

Dressage Judge of the Year

INTERVIEW WITH JULIA FRASER

Julia Fraser, from Warkworth is one of New Zealand's longest standing dressage judges. Last year her contribution to the sport was recognised by Equestrian New Zealand when she was named Dressage Judge of the Year. We caught up with her to find out what it takes to be a senior judge and to ask her opinion on the discipline today.

Elaine Knox-Thompson and Suzanne Dickens held the country's first national dressage competition in Rotorua in the early '60s, and I really became very passionate about it from then.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: What do you enjoy so much about the discipline?

Julia Fraser: The training side of it has always appealed to me. Not simply training because you want to compete, but training for training's sake. Before I stopped riding, eight years ago, I got a lot of satisfaction out of teaching the horses the movements.

I also love the fact that you can compete against yourself as well as others. You know if you and the horse are improving, test by test. I also like to see young horses progress in their careers. It's so much fun to watch them improve and develop over the years.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: How long have you been a dressage judge?

Julia Fraser: I have been a dressage judge for 40 years now. When I had my children and was working as a sharemilker, I couldn't afford my own horse. Judging was a great way to stay involved.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: What are some of your pet hates in dressage?

Julia Fraser: I really dislike untidy turnout. Competition dressage is a lot to do with the picture you present; if you look a mess, you will attract attention for all the wrong reasons. It's like going to a job interview; you can win or lose it in those first few seconds.

The things that I find particularly off-putting when people are coming down the centre line include scruffy, loose hair, stocks not pinned down and coloured stocks. Once I even considered writing 'why are you dressed for the ball while your horse is dressed for the bedroom,' at the bottom of an advanced test sheet as the horse's turnout was so appalling. The rider was in top hat and tails and the horse wasn't even plaited.

At the end of the day, good presentation is a sign of respect to the judge and your fellow competitors. It shows you care about the event and what you're doing. Sometimes, people simply don't realise that they are drawing attention to the wrong things. In those cases, I do try to point them gently in the right direction.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Describe a typical day in the life of a judge.

Julia Fraser: These days there is no average day! I am often up at the crack of dawn and out of the house at 5am. At championship

"...they should be focussing on putting in the correct basic training every day."



shows, you can be judging from 7.30am until 5pm or 6pm, depending on the size of the classes. It can be a very long day and sometimes you need to change how the classes are broken up as organisers occasionally forget that judges need to take breaks...They are now supposed to give an hour for lunch.

The shows are usually pretty good, but I did have one of the worst experiences of my career earlier this year. The organisers told me I would be judging from 8.30am-11am and then 11.15am-4pm. I turned around and said 'Oh no, I'm not!' Someone else, who was less forthright, ended up judging 74 horses that day with hardly any respite and was exhausted.

This kind of poor organisation is detrimental to everyone. Most importantly, cramming so much judging time in like that is not fair on the competitors. A person can only concentrate for so long. If you judge 30 horses and 30 movements in a row, you will have made 900 snap decisions and you have to try to keep steady and consistent throughout. If you are tired and overworked, it is very difficult to give everyone equal focus.

Some people say that the judges are always complaining, but that's not what it's about. We're always trying to do a good job. However, we also do the job because we love it. You have to keep getting that enjoyment out of it; otherwise what is the point of doing it? If the day is a marathon and the judge is denied sufficient toilet and lunch breaks, they won't keep coming back. We need to encourage more judges

to continue in their role and new ones to come on board. That won't happen if situations like the one I have just described occur too often.


SHOW/CIRCUIT: What does it take to be a top dressage judge?

Julia Fraser: You need to have a strong personality but not be overbearing, have a quick eye for assessment and an ability to remain consistent. With all the decisions that need to be made, it is also important to be confident, without being arrogant.


SHOW/CIRCUIT: Finally, is there anything you would do to improve dressage in New Zealand?

Julia Fraser: We have the horses here in New Zealand; I don't understand why so many people race off to buy something from overseas. What our riders don't have are eyes on the ground at all times. It's so important. In Germany, they don't have weekly lessons as such, like we do here. They simply have someone sitting in the corner of the arena watching whenever there are riders in the saddle. They can be observing ten people ride at once and will comment as each one goes past.


Quite a few riders have also got into the habit of only training their horses for the next competition. They suddenly put all their energy into schooling one particular movement because it's going to feature in their test a few weeks down the track. That's not what it should be about. In fact, I was always told not to practise my test before the show! Instead, they should be focusing on putting in the correct, basic training every day. That is the only way to grow and improve.




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