

U.S. Para Equestrian Association: Para Dressage 101

How to Get Started in Para Dressage



What is Para Dressage?

Para Dressage is Dressage for Riders/Athletes with an eligible, permanent, physical impairment (a deficiency in or loss of body function or structure) as defined by the [FEI Para Equestrian Dressage Classification Manual](#).

In Para Dressage the Athlete's mobility, strength and coordination are assessed in order to establish their Classification Profile. Para Dressage is "parallel to Dressage" using the same basics in training, gaits, movements and figures. Unlike Dressage, athletes compete according to their Classification Grade. Athletes with similar functional ability profiles are grouped into competition grades. The grades range from I (most severely impaired) to V (least impaired). Competition within each grade is judged on individual competitor skills on their horse, without regard to the competitor's impairment. Para Dressage Athletes also must train and build their riding skill level and knowledge before reaching the highest level of their grade.

Getting Started

- 1. Learn to ride independently.** Ride two or more times per week.
- 2. Obtain a National Classification**
[Request Classification](#) through the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) Para Equestrian Director, Lauren Johnson at lkjohnson@usef.org. Once paperwork has been submitted, a USEF Classification Coordinator determines if criteria has been met and schedules an in-person evaluation. When evaluation is completed, a National Grade and profile is assigned, and dispensation certificate is issued. Classifiers work with International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA) Classifiers for athletes with a visual impairment. All required forms and medical documentation must be sent **at least six weeks before desired classification date** and/or a review/update of your compensating aids.
- 3. Find a barn** where you can learn the basics of Dressage gaits, rhythm, relaxation, connection, and basic horse care. Do your research to [find a barn](#) that offers instruction and horses that are appropriate for your ability and needs.
 - a. Some barns are designated [USEF/USPEA Centers of Excellence](#) (COE).
 - b. If available find a local [Pony Club](#)
 - c. You may need to change barns if your current training place is not focused on Dressage and/or competition, or when your riding skills outgrow the horses and Dressage knowledge available.
- 4. Continue learning the basics of the Dressage/Para Dressage tests.**
 - a. Test movements, gaits, training to ride a test
- 5. Buying or leasing a horse**
It is not recommended to lease or buy more horse than you need! Search for a sound horse with correct basic gaits and a good mind, considering safety first. A nice four beat walk is important no matter your grade. The quality of your horse will be more important as the quality and level of your riding skills improve.
- 6. Learn the Basics of Competition**
Memberships are required for both horse and rider to participate at local USEF/USDF (U.S. Dressage Federation) licensed shows offering [USDF](#), [USEF](#) and [FEI \(Fédération Équestre Internationale\) Para Dressage tests](#). Attend a Para Dressage clinic/camp/symposium that will give you additional information and resources. Ask your coach and other riders to share their competition experiences.
Needed for competitions:
 - a. Memberships (horse and rider): [USEF](#), [USDF](#)
 - b. Memberships (rider only): [USPEA](#), local Group Member Organization (state organization)
 - c. USEF dispensation certificate
 - d. Horse medical documents/passport

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7. **Build a team** of individuals who will help you at clinics and shows: coach(es), therapeutic support persons as needed, other barn staff, family and friends. It is the rider's responsibility to cover their needs, care for their horse, equipment, transport, mounting, etc. Coaches and barns usually will tell you how to manage this and help you depending on what they have available.
8. **Training**
Set goals for yourself. If you desire to compete at higher levels, goals should be focused on attaining the skill level to ride at your national classification grade. You may also consider working toward completing requirements to apply for [USEF Pathway program](#) (Emerging, Developing, Elite).
9. **Begin showing** at your skill level when your coach(es) think you are ready.
10. **Competition levels** (All subject to USEF dressage rules)
You may not initially show at your grade level, depending on your skill set(s).
 - a. [USDF Introductory tests](#): walk trot only
 - b. [FEI Para Dressage tests](#):
 - i. Grade I-III, walk trot only, no cantering, ridden in a smaller arena
 - ii. Grade IV-V, walk/trot/canter, ridden in a larger arena
 - c. Grades III, IV, V, some Grade II and those able to canter may start riding USDF Training Level tests and advance to higher levels as riding skills progress and impairment(s) allow.
 - d. Participate in the USEF Para Dressage National Championships
 - e. [USDF also offers Para Dressage awards and various program opportunities.](#)

First Steps to High Performance

1. Obtain an International FEI classification

If your goal is to compete in international Para Dressage, you must have a FEI classification.

[Request Classification](#) through the USEF Para Equestrian Director, Laureen Johnson at lkjohnson@usef.org.

Once paperwork has been submitted, a USEF Classification Coordinator determines if criteria has been met and schedules an in-person evaluation. When completed, a National Grade and profile is assigned, and dispensation certificate is issued. Classifiers work with IBSA Classifiers for athletes with a visual impairment. International classification is often available at CPEDI3* (International FEI Para Dressage) competitions. All required forms and medical documentation must be sent at least six weeks before desired classification date and/or review/update your compensating aids. Also, start using the [USEF Virtual Judging Program](#).

2. FEI Competitions

- a. International Para Dressage competitions are offered in the U.S. as well as abroad. Attending a CPEDI3* competition as a spectator is extremely beneficial to learn/observe how competitions are conducted, meet elite Para Dressage athletes. This level of competition requires regular training and riding four to six times weekly, a sound, good quality horse with a FEI passport and quality FEI level gaits for your grade level.
- b. You and your horse must be able to travel across the country and abroad.
- c. Higher level competition offers the opportunity of:
 - a. working toward [USEF Developing and Elite Pathway programs](#)
 - b. earning [USDF Para Dressage awards & additional awards](#)
 - c. qualifying for [USEF Para Dressage National Championships](#)
 - d. qualifying to compete in [CPEDI](#) competitions
 - e. working toward qualifying for USA Para Dressage Teams
 - i. CPEDI3*, World Equestrian Games (WEG) and Paralympics (Athlete must meet all requirements as set forth in the USEF Selection Criteria)

Rider Resources

It is the Rider's/Athlete's responsibility to know the rules and requirements of their sport. Rules are regularly reviewed and updated, and new opportunities frequently added. It is recommended to check sites often.

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Organizations

- U.S. Equestrian Federation, www.usef.org: (Governs U.S. Para Dressage and National competitions)
- U.S. Dressage Federation, www.usdf.org (USEF affiliate for the Dressage discipline)
- U.S. Para Equestrian Association www.USPEA.org (USEF affiliate for Para Equestrian)
- Fédération Equestre Internationale, www.FEI.org (Governs international Para Dressage and international competitions)

Rules

- [FEI Para Dressage Tests](#)
- [FEI Para Dressage Rules](#)
- [USEF Para Dressage and Dressage rules](#)
- [USEF General Rules \(Complete Rule Book\)](#)

Information

- [USEF Para Dressage Programs and Forms](#)
- [USEF Para-Dressage Program Structure and Pathways](#) (requirements and applications)
- [USDF Competition and Results](#) (Licensed shows calendar; PE indicates shows offering FEI Para Dressage tests)
- [Adequan®/USDF Para Dressage rider of the year awards program](#) (pages 22 and 30 in USDF Member Guide)

Social Media

[USA Para Dressage](#)

[USA Dressage](#)

[USPEA](#)

[USDF](#)

[USEF](#)

Basic Dressage Information

- About Dressage: <http://www.usdf.org/about/about-dressage/>
- New to Dressage: <http://www.usdf.org/about/about-dressage/newtodressage.asp>
- Tack and Equipment: <http://www.usdf.org/about/about-dressage/competition/tack-equipment.asp>

USPEA serves to advise, advance and promote U.S. Paralympic Equestrian and Para Equestrian sport
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For additional information contact Hope Hand, USPEA President at wheeler966@aol.com



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