

## **Working Equitation in South Africa – A Sport for All!**

*Working Equitation originated in Europe around thirty years ago and is a relatively new discipline in South Africa. This exciting sport was created to test the equestrian skills of both horse and rider in a working environment for farming and cattle herding. Often described as dressage with obstacles, it is open to all levels of riders with any breed of horse and is heaps of fun!*



### *What is Working Equitation?*

*Working equitation is a fun and exciting alternative to traditional equestrian sports offering competitors various challenges in different aspects. It combines the grace and beauty of dressage with the accuracy of a trail ride class, the speed and agility of a gymkhana and the ability to herd cattle in the field. This fascinating sport tests the harmony and partnership of both horse and rider. Add a few obstacles to your training sessions, and suddenly everything is more meaningful by effectively applying dressage principles to actual functions.*

*By taking part in working equitation, riders have the chance to try something new and creative with their horses. There is truth in the international slogan that working equitation is “the fun way to train seriously!”*

*Whatever your preferred discipline, your horse will benefit and gain incredible experience from working equitation training and competitions. Exposing your horse to a variety of obstacles allows them to become more confident and enjoy their work, making them a safer ride as a result. It is also a great way to sharpen the rider's aids and learn basics like transitions, bending, lateral work and, at the higher levels, flying changes.*

*Even if you don't want to compete in events, you can still improve your horsemanship skills by attending training days and clinics. There are many practical elements to the sport which are highly beneficial when out on a hack such as opening and closing a gate, crossing a bridge or simply popping over a log.*

*The competition event can be for individuals or teams and comprises of three or four phases. Each phase tests the skills and basic training of both horse and rider. First, a combination must perform a dressage test before moving onto the Ease of Handling phase. Here the partnership negotiates a course of various obstacles at their own pace with each of the challenges testing the horse's dressage ability.*

*For the third phase, riders negotiate certain obstacles at speed depending on the level of the horse and rider. At the higher-level events, the final phase of the competition includes cattle handling. Each combination receives scores based on their placings in each stage which are then calculated to give their final placing in the competition.*



*As with many equestrian sports, working equitation originated from the horse being utilised to assist humans as a working animal.*

*In Spanish, working equitation translates as “Doma Vaquera,” which loosely means “schooling of the stock horse.” It is comparable to the American western riding used in fieldwork and working cattle as well as connected to the art of bullfighting. Both disciplines require speed, agility and quickness from a horse with a high degree of collection. Doma Vaquera horses perform dressage movements such as shoulder-in, pirouettes, leg yield, half pass and flying changes but with more speed and impulsion than the classical dressage horse.*

*The sport of working equitation began in the mid-1990s pioneered by Spain, Italy, Portugal and France. It showcases both the horsemanship and ranching skills required to work on farms. It developed to preserve and uphold the various riding traditions, costumes and saddlery of the participating countries along with promoting the breeds of horses typically used for ranch work in Europe.*

*European breeds of horses renowned for their ability to work cows include the Iberian horses of Spain and Portugal, the Camargue horse from southern France and the Murgese horse of Italy. Just like the American Quarter horse, these European breeds produce lightning-fast spins, turns and stops. As much of the cattle in southern Europe are aggressive and difficult to rope, riders often carry a long pole or lance to prod the beasts in case of a cattle charge.*

*Although you may not associate the Italians with being cowboys, it was Italy that came up with the competition format of working equitation in 1996 holding the first-ever European Championships. The first world championships took place in Beja, Portugal in 2002.*

*The World Association for Working Equitation (WAWE) was formed in 2004 as the governing body for the sport and soon attracted membership from other European countries including Great Britain, Germany, Belgium, Sweden, Austria, Holland, Switzerland, Czech Republic, Luxembourg and Slovenia. It later spread to the South American countries of Brazil, Columbia and Mexico and introduced to the USA in 2008. The sport is also gaining popularity in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.*

*The rules of the WAWE are for all international competitions, but each country has its own rules for domestic competitions.*



### *Working Equitation Explained*

*Working equitation takes elements from both classical dressage and mounted cattle work combining the two to produce this fascinating and competitive sport. It is a discipline that is accessible to all types of riders with any breed of horse or pony. There are various classes at different levels which range from lead rein to masters and include divisions for children, juniors and youths as well as adults. Horses must be over four years old to compete, being at least six years old for masters.*

*Each level has its own rules of which gaits to use. At the introductory levels, combinations trot between obstacles and have the choice of walking or trotting at the obstacles, although they must walk over the bridge and it is compulsory to trot the slalom. As you move up the levels, riders canter between the obstacles and then either walk, trot or canter the obstacles as stipulated in the rule book. At the lower levels, riders have the reins in both hands, but the long-term goal is to ride each phase with the reins in one hand and be 100% accurate!*



### *Dressage Phase*

*Dressage is the first phase performed by all levels in a 20x40m short dressage arena with the letters C, M, B, F, A, K, E and H. At the higher levels; there are no letters. There are between one and five judges depending on the classification of the working equitation competition.*

*Working dressage differs from pure dressage as judges are not looking for highly expressive gaits. The horse should be forward and active but light and responsive to the rider's aids. The focus is on the partnership of horse and rider and the understanding between the two that helps gain higher marks.*

*Each level has a dressage test requiring specific movements scored in a similar way to a regular dressage competition. Judges pay attention to the impulsion, relaxation, suppleness and roundness of the horse along with the lightness of the aids. As the combinations move up the levels, the movements become more difficult. The training aims to develop a horse with the collection and engagement required at Masters level.*

*At advanced and Masters level, competitors must ride a freestyle dressage test to music. Each movement is in a specific order, but the rider decides where to execute them and choreographs the test to music.*

*Each movement is scored out of 10 from the judge along with collective marks and comments for the overall performance. These are for the paces, impulsion, calmness*

*and submission of the horse as well for the rider's skills and presentation (tack and attire) of the combination.*

*At lead rein and introductory levels, tests are in walk and trot only and at the next level, a few steps of canter. As competitors progress, they must ride transitions, lateral movements, rein back, counter canter and simple lead changes before going on to do flying changes.*

### *Ease of Handling Phase*

*The Ease of Handling phase is a course of obstacles and challenges likely encountered in the day to day life of a working horse on a farm or ranch. Ideally, this phase takes place in an arena measuring 70m by 30m with a sand surface as grass may be too slippery or hard. The length of the course and the number of obstacles used depends on the performance level.*

*The obstacles are in number order of execution with transition markers placed close to the challenges. Combinations are judged for each obstacle the same way as in the working dressage phase with marks out of ten along with collective marks for the whole course.*

*Judges look at the line taken from obstacle to obstacle as well as the accuracy of your transitions. By attending training clinics, you can learn how to ride accurate routes around the course. Judges look at the partnership qualities of each horse and rider focusing on the calmness and correct outline of the horse.*

*For the horse, the judge considers:*

- *Quality of the start and finish*
- *The regularity of movements, suppleness and collection*
- *Obedience*
- *Submission to the aids*
- *Correct bend*
- *Correct lead changes*

*Whereas with the rider the judge looks at:*

- *Position in the saddle*
- *Use of aids*
- *Accuracy of movements and transitions*

*Up to intermediate level, riders can have the reins in both hands, but at advanced and Masters, competitors must have them in one hand. At the lower levels, horse and rider combinations walk through the obstacles and then in between in walk or trot.*

*Canter is introduced at the medium levels with simple changes of lead through trot, before progressing to a simple change through walk then flying changes. There are no more than eight obstacles in a lead rein class with up to sixteen in a Masters class.*

*Obstacles and challenges seen in the Ease of Handling phase include:*

- *Opening and closing a gate*
- *Walking over a bridge*
- *Riding down a corridor of poles, ring a bell and rein back out*
- *Side pass along a pole on the ground*
- *A figure of 8 between two barrels*
- *Riding a cloverleaf around three barrels*
- *Jump straw bales*
- *Rein back through a corridor of poles with a cup in hand*
- *Single and double pole slalom*
- *Stock pen, performing a half-circle/pirouette*
- *Varied footing*
- *Walk through a water-filled ditch.*

*The rider is also required to pick up and use a pole known in Spanish as a garrocha, traditionally used for cattle work in Spain. Being able to handle the garrocha while controlling a horse with the reins in one hand is a real test of partnership skills. Riders are required to either knock down a ball or spear a ring, riding their horses in canter on the correct lead when participating at the higher levels of the sport.*

### *Speed Phase*

*The speed phase is the most exciting part that is likened to the jump-off in a show jumping class as combinations negotiate a shortened course of the Ease of Handling phase against the clock.*

*This phase tests the balance, agility, co-ordination and attention of both horse and rider. It is considered the most exciting part of working equitation!*

*As this part of the competition is judged purely on time, competitors do not need to worry about correct canter leads or bend. There is no emphasis on style, and they can choose any gait and speed. There are time penalties added for riding the challenges incorrectly or if an obstacle is knocked over or left out. Going the wrong way results in elimination. Bonus points may be accrued by knocking down a ball or securing a ring with the garrocha with ten seconds taken off the finishing time. The winner of this phase is the combination with the fastest time with the fewest penalties.*

*However, riding at speed can be detrimental if the necessary training isn't established and can result in both horse and rider losing trust in one another. A horse must be taught slowly to manoeuvre a course, so he gains experience and confidence before building up to a faster speed. This phase is not included at the lower levels or in children's classes.*



### *Cattle Handling Phase*

*Cattle handling is the final phase that usually features high-level riders and is only for team competitions with four participants in each team. The goal is for each rider to move a pre-selected cow from the herd and then once it is in the cutting zone, move the beast as a team to the designated pen. Horses must be able to start, stop and turn quickly and be highly attentive, showing their versatility as a working horse.*

*This phase is a timed event, and penalties occur for any errors. Each person has a maximum of three minutes to cut and herd their cow. Anyone failing to do so in the allocated time does not receive any points. The fastest team is the winner, and the score of the quickest individual is also recognised.*

### *Working Equitation in South Africa*

*Working equitation is still in its infancy in South Africa. Much is being done to promote the sport, and it is recognised now by the South African Equestrian Federation (SAEF). At the moment few horses can compete at international level where cattle handling is required, so the focus is mainly on the three phases of Dressage, Ease of Handling and Speed.*

*The sole organisation for working equitation in South Africa is ZAWE. They stand by their slogan “Working equitation – an equestrian sport for everyone.” They believe that riders of all levels and ages can participate in their training clinics and competitions with any horse or pony so long as it is fit and sound. Currently, for Introductory Level competitions, the ZAWE has permission from ANWE Ltd (Australian National Working Equitation) to follow their rule book.*

*Riders have the option of wearing the traditional gear used for working cattle, or they can choose to wear riding attire that matches their style of riding. At events, you can see a vast array of different outfits and horse gear which makes this sport so fascinating. Riding hats approved by the SAEF are compulsory. At the lower levels of the competition, smart riding club attire is allowed along with clean and neat tack in good working order. Certain bits and bitless bridles are not allowed so check the rules before taking part in an event.*

*To compete in events, you are required to have individual membership under “athlete status” from your Provincial Working Equitation Association along with membership of ZAWE and SAEF.*

*Events require five judges, so competitors often volunteer as officials as well as competing, ensuring plenty of helpers. The working equitation community provides plenty of support to one another, which is what makes this fun and challenging sport so unique.*

*For more information on Working Equitation please contact:*

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