

LONG-TERM EQUESTRIAN DEVELOPMENT: DRESSAGE



GUIDELINES FOR ATHLETES & COACHES



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Note to Coaches and Participants:

Equestrian sport is an 'early start/late development' sport. Children and beginner riders need a broad sport experience that includes opportunity to try multiple disciplines in the sport, as well as ample opportunity to develop general athletic skills that will help the participant progress in equestrian sport to their maximum desired potential. Please refer to the red "Developing Equestrians in Canada" Guidebook for additional information. Coaches are encouraged to discuss general athletic needs with their students, and to assist students in designing an appropriately balanced training plan to develop mounted and unmounted athletic and horsemanship skills.

Acknowledgements

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Equine Canada Dressage Coaching Committee
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Companion Resources available through Equine Canada and provincial equestrian associations:

- "Developing Equestrians in Canada" (athlete development guidebook)
- "Stable Management"
- Equine Canada Learn to Ride Program
- Equine Canada Dressage Rulebooks
- Equine Canada/National Coaching Certification Program Coaching Courses and Materials:
 - Tier 1:
 - Equestrian Teaching and Learning
 - Planning an Equestrian Lesson
 - Analyzing Beginner Equestrian Performance
 - Making Ethical Decisions in the Equestrian Environment
 - Tier 2:
 - Designing an Equestrian Sport Program
 - Managing an Equestrian Sport Program
 - Training Mental Skills for Equestrian Sport
 - Analyzing Performance Coaching Clinics
 - Discipline Specialist Clinics
 - Tier 3:
 - Equine Clean Sport
 - Developing Athletic Abilities in the Equestrian (human) Athlete
 - Developing Athletic Abilities in the Equine Athlete
 - Performance Planning for High Performance Training (Yearly Training Plans)
 - Advanced Practice Planning (Lesson planning)
 - Training and Planning for Injury Prevention & Recovery
 - Analyzing Advanced Equine Performance

Introduction



While Equestrian athletes pass through the same stages of development as athletes in other sports, athletes do not necessarily move through the stages at the same rate, or within the optimal age-range. Optimal age-range windows are based on sport science principals for describing the optimal human development windows for acquiring and developing sport capacity and skills.

Equestrian sport is described as an 'early start, late development' sport. Among the various equestrian disciplines, the physical and mental challenges of the Dressage discipline at advanced levels can even stretch that timeline so that athletes may spend longer in certain stages, and mature in a higher age-range.

It is important to understand that lack of acquisition of certain skills and abilities within the optimal window means that the athlete in any equestrian discipline will have to address the gap remedially. Also, athletes that appear to be prodigiously ready early, are not advised to progress too quickly ahead of suggested age-ranges. Athletes should not be rushed through development stages. Just as with taking shortcuts in horse-training, attempting short-cuts in athlete development has a longer term negative impact on the athlete's performance and career.

In the Dressage discipline, advanced training demands at Prix St. George to Grand Prix levels make it important for coaches and athletes to monitor and respect the athlete's development requirements and pace. Individual Dressage athletes may not progress through the discipline at the same pace as others.

Competition and performance expectations would be realistically set to the development stage at which the athlete is weakest since pushing too much can have damaging effects on future performance and on safety and welfare for both horse and rider. The levels of difficulty of the dressage tests are set in order to ensure that the physical, tactical skill and mental development of horse and rider progress together at a pace that is optimal for performance, safety and welfare at subsequent levels.



The 10 Key Factors **LTED**

INFLUENCING



1 THE TEN YEAR RULE

Research on peak performance in sport and other areas commonly accepts that it takes 10,000 hours or approximately 10 years to develop to peak performance. Exactly how long it takes is very athlete-dependant. In the Dressage discipline, peak elite performance may exceed this estimate because of a later age-range desired before specialization, and the need to reach a certain level of personal mental and emotional maturity before competing with a horse at the highest levels.

2 FUNDAMENTALS

Fundamental sport skills for equestrians include BOTH equestrian-specific skills and general physical vocabulary and capacity. Equestrians entering the sport of Dressage might have an introduction to equestrian sport in a wide variety of disciplines. Regardless of their starting point, it is important for children under 10/12 to maintain involvement in a variety of sport and equestrian activities in order to develop a base of capacity for movement, horsemanship skills, cardio-vascular ability and stamina in order to be able to excel competitively at later stages.

3 SPECIALIZATION

Athletes are not encouraged to specialize in Dressage competition prior to peak height velocity (PHV- growth spurt at adolescence). Main reasons include:

- a) The nature of Dressage requires athletes to develop a high athletic vocabulary, and to maintain it. Early specialization might favour development in some skills, but reduce ability for others.
- b) At more focused competitive levels, the demand of competition and the demand of the training regimen cannot be undertaken until certain maturity is reached.
- c) As the athlete progresses, the sport is mentally demanding with added responsibility for the safety and well-being of the horse in the progressive training. Beyond introductory stages, athletes cannot be exposed to certain risk levels when they are not mentally mature enough to make reasonable safety and welfare decisions for the horse they are partnering with.



4 DEVELOPMENTAL AGE

A key development age milestone for athletes in Dressage is after puberty when the athlete is consolidating integrated movement patterns and achieving mental and physical maturity. High demands of competition and training schedules in the later competing development phases make it very important that athletes not be pushed to competitive and training levels beyond advisability for their development stage. Each athlete is an individual, and it is up to the coach to assess the athlete's readiness, and to help the athlete pace their schedule and goals to what is appropriate.

Mental and emotional maturity are of special importance at higher competitive levels in Dressage because the higher the technical challenge, the more the rider is required to think independently, and make potentially risky decisions on behalf of another living creature.



5 WINDOWS OF TRAINABILITY

The five main sport capacities of suppleness, skill, speed, stamina and strength have optimum time-frames in which they are acquired as an athlete develops. If the capacity is not developed well within the optimum window, the athlete will be challenged later in this area. For example, the window of trainability for suppleness is roughly between the ages of 6-10. A young rider who may not engage in activities other than riding, may not develop sufficient suppleness during this time. Lack of suppleness will later have an impact on movement ability, and wear and tear on joints.

Another example is skill acquisition for which the optimum window is 8-12yrs. Young riders who specialise too early, risk losing an ease with some skills that would be required in Dressage later. Coaches and athletes need to be aware of special challenges each athlete

may face as an individual, and considerations for their training program which may result from missed windows of trainability earlier in their development.

Using the earlier windows of trainability to give a rider the right base of equestrian and athletic skill is the best way to give the athlete the preconditions for success with later specialization in Dressage.



6 DEVELOPING THE WHOLE PERSON: PHYSICAL, INTELLECTUAL, EMOTIONAL, AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

At higher competitive levels, Dressage places a very high demand on athletes for training time; technical accuracy; and emotional maturity for placing the horse's needs first, dealing with competitive pressure and working effectively in a team environment.

It is a given that only a very small percentage of athletes will go on to elite performance. A much larger percentage of participants will go on to teach, train and ride with a broad exposure to equestrian disciplines. Equestrian participants tend to stay with the sport actively for decades, or to come back to it later in life. Coaches and athletes keep in mind that the first goal of sport participation is to develop a person with the character qualities to be successful and responsible in their chosen path in life, and to be a responsible and well-rounded horse-person placing the welfare of the horse before personal ambition. Also, although performance is individual, the logistics of competition favour the ability to work well within a team environment.





PLANNING TRAINING SCHEDULES

Participants and coaches in Dressage spend considerable time on training and preparation months and years in advance of a competitive goal, at all levels of the sport. At high performance levels, it can take years to prepare horses: ligament and joint strength, skeletal adaptations, muscular adaptation and endurance, technical skills and mental ability. The rider is expected to develop parallel to their horse. As the athlete advances, training and competition loads also necessitate consideration of rest and recovery periods through the year so that for safety reasons, horses and riders are prepared and at peak at time of competition, and avoid injury. Beyond introductory stages, the volume and intensity of training required to achieve the skill, knowledge and experience horse and rider need necessitates a high degree of commitment and planning.



CALENDAR PLANNING FOR COMPETITION

Competition selection and timing has to be realistic and achievably matched to athletic ability, skill level and commitment to appropriate training regimen. Coaches and athletes need to be aware of the milestone markers in their calendar which will signal to them whether or not they are on track to a desired competitive goal, or need to re-adjust the goals to match the feasible training schedule.



SYSTEM ALIGNMENT AND INTEGRATION

An athlete's readiness for specialized coaching in Dressage should be assessed, and all facets of readiness for competition taken into account.



CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Evaluation of each athlete's stage in development is a continuous process. Continuous improvement does not always mean continuous progression through the levels of Dressage and the levels of competition. If a gap is discovered, it needs to be addressed so that in the long-term view, the athlete can progress safely in the sport.



FUNdamentals

GENERAL EQUESTRIAN





*Fun, Safety
& Active Participation!*




TRAINING

- Introduction to horses
- Explore the fun experience of horses and participation in the equestrian environment
- Group participation – interaction and socialization with peers through games
- Encourage experimentation with different equestrian disciplines, or in programs offering broad exposure/broad sport development (Pony Club, 4H, Vaulting, experimenting with involvement with different disciplines.)
- Acquire basic transferable skills (balance, coordination, proprioception, physical/athlete 'vocabulary', flexibility)
- Encourage ongoing participation in a broad variety of other sports and activities to maximize the window of opportunity for basic sport abilities

TRAINING TIME

-  Equestrian: 30-50 min. / week progressing to 100 min. / week
-  Other:
 - 60 min. daily activity as per Canada Food and Health Guidelines
 - Involvement in as wide a range of other sports and games as possible

SPECIAL TRAINING WINDOW

-  Horse body language and movement, confidence with and around horses (5-8 yrs)
-  Balance, co-ordination, flexibility, sport vocabulary (*non-equestrian activity 3-5 yrs, & 5-8 yrs*)
-  Perseverance, reward of effort, simple goal-setting, focus, passion for the sport

OPTIMAL AGE RANGE: 3 - 8 yrs (*active 3-5 yrs, introduction to equestrian 5-8 yrs*)

COMPETITIONS

- Non-competitive group activities: fun days; in-house activities – non-competitive fun experiences. (*Various disciplines*)

COACH: Instructor

Learning & Training to Ride

GENERAL ENGLISH DISCIPLINES





Optimal Age Range: 8 - 14

*Fun, Commitment
& Challenge!*

TRAINING




- Further develop and consolidate basic equestrian skills introduced at the Fundamental Stage through experimentation with different disciplines and activities
- Group and individual training sessions with coach
- Emphasize frequency of practice and consistency in skill performance within practices
- Initiate emphasis on overall physical fitness and fitness lifestyle, as well as further development of general athletic skill through a variety of activities outside equestrian sport
- Further develop engagement in equestrian sport through a variety of involvement opportunities within the equestrian community such as volunteering or supporting competing athletes, 4-H or Pony Club or similar equestrian school programs

TRAINING TIME

-  Equestrian: 2 training sessions/ week (off-peak) to 5 session (peak season)
-  Other:
 - 60 min. daily activity as per Canada Food and Health Guidelines
 - Participation in up to 3 other sports 3-4x / week

SPECIAL TRAINING WINDOW

OPTIMAL AGE RANGE: 8 - 14

-  Riding 'feel', empathy, 'vocabulary' of movement and horsemanship skills
-  Co-ordination, stamina, agility, aerobic ability
-  Positive attitude mindset, goal-setting, focus in spite of distractions, confidence, consistency

COMPETITIONS

RATIO: mostly practice, occasional competition

- Primarily non-competitive: In-house "schooling" competitions & fun days (*Various disciplines*)
- Technical:
 - Dressage equivalent of Walk/Trot to EC Training Level

COACH: Instructor (various disciplines) or Coach 1 / Competition Coach

Learning & Training to Compete

GENERAL



*Fun, Responsibility
& Success!*





Optimal Age Range: 12 - 16

TRAINING




- Introduce participants to competitive experience – analysis and evaluation of performance, rules, ethics
- Introduction of concept of setting competition goals
- Foster healthy priorities in competition doing your best, sportsmanship, having fun, team-work with the support crew and peers
- Encourage competition in different disciplines with goal of balanced development in horsemanship and equestrian skills
- Maintenance of involvement in other sports and conditioning modalities which favour transferrable abilities: flexibility, endurance, agility, rhythm, strength, speed and competitive focus

TRAINING TIME

-  Equestrian: 3-5 training sessions/ week
-  Other: 3-5x/ week, 30-60 min

SPECIAL TRAINING WINDOW

OPTIMAL AGE RANGE: 12 - 16

-  Control of horse through micro movement, understanding biomechanics, training for performance
-  Physical growth spurt ideal for developing endurance, speed and proprioception (12-15 yrs) and strength (15-18 yrs)
-  Self-awareness, goal-setting, managing stress, team-work mindset, solid training habit

COMPETITIONS

RATIO: 80% training / 20% competition

- Provincial, regional and local competitions up to Provincial Championships (*various disciplines*)
- Technical:
 - Dressage equivalent to EC Training to First Level

COACH: English Competition Coach / Coach 1





Learning & Training to Compete

Dressage Phase One

TRAINING




- Introduce participants to Eventing competition – analysis and evaluation of performance, rules, ethics
- Target appropriate types of competitions
- Reinforce concepts of setting individual performance and competition goals
- Foster healthy priorities in competition doing your best sportsmanship, having fun
- Introduction to Yearly Training Plan (YTP)
- Introduction of competition strategy
- Encourage involvement in other sports and activities for variety, physical development and development of competitive and sportsmanship skills

TRAINING TIME

-  Equestrian: 4-6 training sessions/ week
-  Other: 3-5x/ week, 30-60 min

SPECIAL TRAINING WINDOW

OPTIMAL AGE RANGE: 12 - 16

-  Refinement of aids and role as trainer of the horse
-  Physical growth spurt ideal for developing agility, endurance and speed (12-15) and strength (15-18)
-  Self-awareness, goal-setting, and planning, managing multiple demands, team-work mindset, solid training habit

COMPETITIONS

RATIO: 70% training / 30% competition

- Provincial and regional Dressage Competitions to Provincial Championships, FEI in Pony and Child divisions only
(*May still be competing other disciplines simultaneously*)
- Technical:
 - Dressage equivalent to EC up to Second Level
 - FEI Child and Pony Divisions (children 12-14 and 12-16)

COACH: English Competition Coach / Coach 1, Dressage experience, Dressage Coach Specialist





Learning & Training to Compete

Dressage Phase Two

TRAINING




- Introduction of more discipline specialization
- Further develop Yearly Training Planning (YTP)
- Increased commitment to training while maintaining a balance with school
- Develop competition strategy
- Further development of new and consolidate and refine basic technical skills (discipline specialization)
- Support commitment to unmounted training time to maximize athletic ability and endurance and reduce risk of injury
- Ensure planned rest and recovery periods in the training schedule, harmonized with need for peaking in competition
- Ensure access to adequate calibre horses at this stage and above.

TRAINING TIME

-  Equestrian: 4-6 training sessions/ week per horse (saddle time on more than one horse is ideal)
-  Other: 3-5x/ week, 30-60 min (should have a training plan synchronized with equestrian training plan)

SPECIAL TRAINING WINDOW

OPTIMAL AGE RANGE: 14 - 21

-  Technical skill development
-  Proprioception, strength and stamina (athlete will have to start working at maintaining flexibility and suppleness against tightening effect of rigorous training schedule)
-  Self-awareness, goal-setting, and planning, managing multiple demands, team-work mindset, solid training habit

COMPETITIONS

RATIO: 60-70% training / 40-30% competition

- National Competitions
- Technical:
 - Dressage equivalent up to EC Fourth Level

COACH: Dressage Coach Specialist / Coach 2, High Performance / Coach 3

Learning & Training to Win



*Fun, Excellence
& Achievement!*

TRAINING

- Regular International competitions
- Consolidate and refine the repertoire of skills to meet International competition standards
- Develop consistency of performance, optimal performance state
- Refine pre-competition vs. competition training plans; monitor fatigue and plan training for injury prevention
- Team competition environment (NAYRCs) – International Federation, National Federation, and Provincial Association eligibility and selection standards, etc.
- Enhanced Integrated Support Team (IST) support
- Team coach, individual coach and discipline experts, and fitness/conditioning coach
- National Talent Squad programs – discipline experts
- Potential for training opportunities with International Team coach or Technical Advisor
- Develop ambassadorial skills for representation internationally in a team environment
- Develop coaching and teaching skill (certification as Instructor / Coach if coaching envisioned)
- Access to adequate calibre horses at this stage is essential.

TRAINING TIME

- 🐎 Equestrian: 6 training sessions/ week per horse (multiple horses)
- 🏃 Other: 3-4x/ week, 60-90 min

SPECIAL TRAINING WINDOW

OPTIMAL AGE RANGE: 16 - 25

- 🐎 Technical skill mastery, knowledge of performance standards and rules, develop individuality
- 🏃 Strength, stamina and power
- 🧠 Advanced mental training skills, lifetime training and business habits

COMPETITIONS

RATIO: 60% Training / 40% competition

- Youth: Young Rider Championships (NAJYRC) (team and individual) Adult: FEI levels in International Competitions CDI1* - 3*
- Technical:
 - Dressage equivalent to FEI Prix St. George for Youth, and up to Grand Prix for adults

COACH: Dressage High Performance / Coach 3

Living to Win





Optimal Age Range: 25+

*Joy, Professionalism
& "Owning the Podium!"*

TRAINING




- Senior National Team Program – monitored by Technical Advisor/Head Coach
- Full commitment to International excellence
- Consolidate and refine the equestrian's repertoire of skills to meet International competition standards
- Full Integrated Support Team (IST) support – equine & human
- Major Games – Team selection including NF, FEI, IF, IOC and COC selection standards
- Athlete Assistance Program
- Enhanced Coaching expertise (jumping/dressage, personal conditioning program)

TRAINING TIME

-  Equestrian: 6 training sessions/ week per horse (multiple horses, 3+ hrs / day)
-  Other: 3-4x/ week, 60-90 min

SPECIAL TRAINING WINDOW

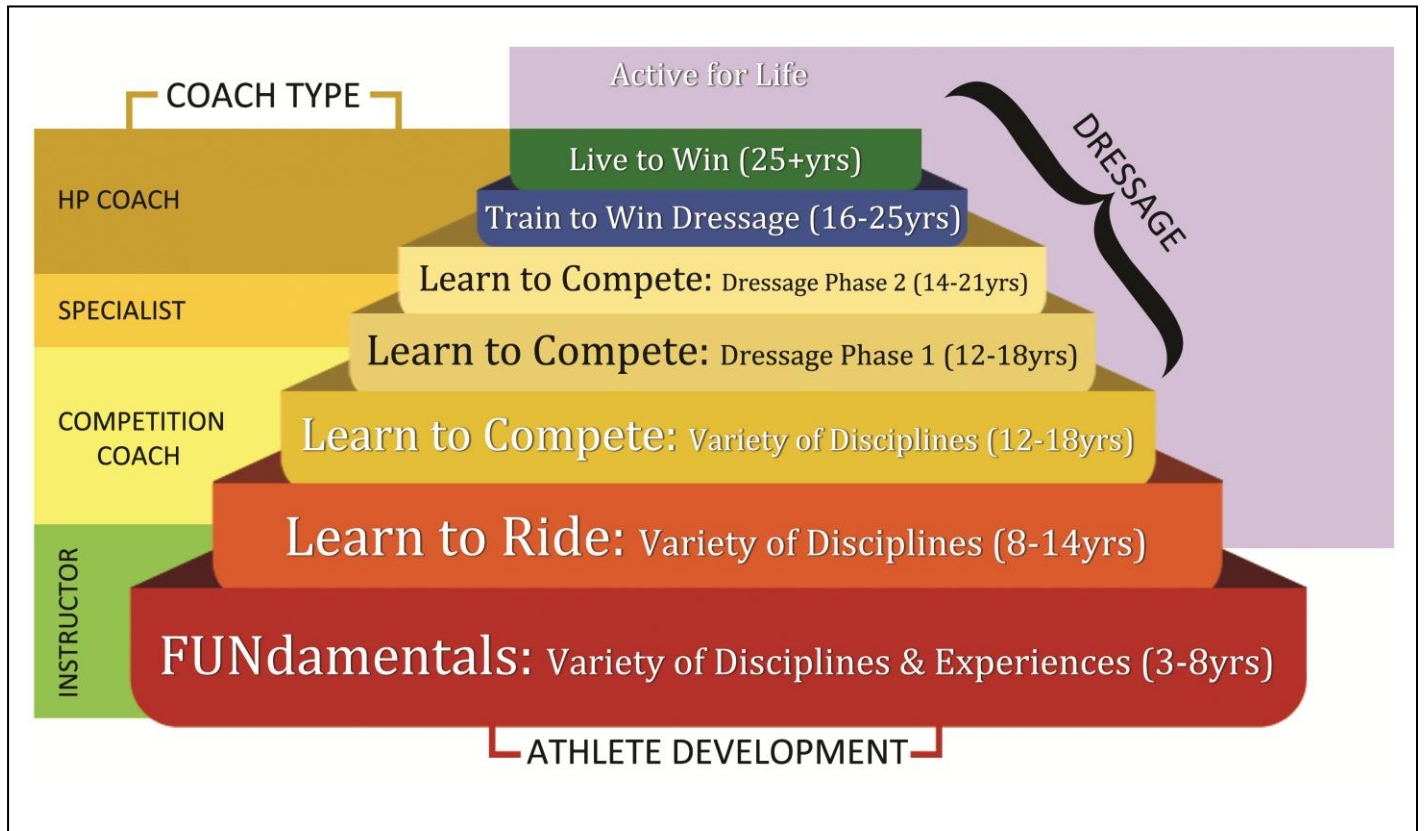
OPTIMAL AGE RANGE: 25+

-  Horse training and business management skill mastery
-  Maintain personal conditioning program to prevent injury and to maximize required competitive capacity: flexibility/suppleness, muscle group re-balancing (symmetry, and ensuring joint integrity against imbalances created through riding), strength, speed, aerobic capacity and stamina with ongoing fitness testing
-  Advanced mental training habits

COMPETITIONS

- Olympic Games
- World Equestrian Games
- Pan American Games
- World Cup
- CDI 3* +
- Technical:
 - Dressage equivalent to FEI Prix St-Georges through Grand Prix in International Competition

COACH: Dressage High Performance / Level 3, Level 4



Primary Differences Between Dressage LTED Model and General Equestrian Model:

- 🍁 Athletes are encouraged to maintain variety of involvement longer, and not specialize before 14/15 years. Young athletes that specialize too early, lose physical vocabulary needed.
- 🍁 Learn to Compete phase is longer, extending into the international competitive levels because of the longer learning curve associated with the significant jumps in technical challenge between each star level. For safety reasons, athletes at advanced levels must spend longer conditioning (horse & human) and must reach appropriate physical and mental maturity levels, and must master the requirements before focusing on campaigning to win at elite levels.
- 🍁 Safety risks present at higher levels necessitate greater planning and preparation and more time spent training; as well as early development of independent thinking for the rider.

Equine Canada Resources Available for Coaches & Athletes



Publications

GENERAL

1. **Developing Equestrians in Canada** (Guidebook for Athletes & Coaches)
2. **Equine Canada Learn to Ride Program**
3. **Stable Management**
4. **Coaching program course reference materials** (see courses below)
5. **Equine Medications & Control Handbook**
6. **Various Equine Canada Rulebooks**

DRESSAGE

1. **Long-Term Equestrian Development: Dressage**
2. **Dressage Rulebook** (Dressage Canada/USDF tests; FEI tests)

Equine Canada Resources Available for Coaches & Athletes

Equestrian & Coach Development Courses



TIER 1: Introductory Modules

1. Equestrian Teaching and Learning
2. Planning an Equestrian Lesson
3. Analyzing Beginner Equestrian Performance
4. Making Ethical Decisions in the Equestrian Environment

TIER 2: Introduction to Competition Modules

1. Designing an Equestrian Sport Program (yearly training plans)
2. Managing an Equestrian Sport Program
3. Training Mental Skills for Equestrian Sport
4. Analyzing Performance for Competition (English disciplines)
5. Competition Specialist Clinics (Eventing, Jump, Dressage)

TIER 3: Advanced Modules

1. Equine Clean Sport (medications, drug testing requirements)
2. Developing Athletic Abilities (human equestrian athlete)
3. Developing Athletic Abilities (equine athlete)
4. Performance Planning for High Performance (advanced training plans)
5. Advanced Practice Planning (lesson planning)
6. Training and Planning for Equine Injury Prevention & Recovery
7. Analyzing Advanced Equine Performance
8. Managing Equestrian High Performance Sport (insurance and nutrition)

Reasons to Train with A Certified Coach or Instructor



PROFESSIONAL & ACCOUNTABLE

Certified coaches are professionals who are expected to adhere to strict standards of the profession. Equine Canada coaches and instructors sign nationally accountable Codes of Ethics and Conduct. Written complaints about coaches are addressed. They are also required to maintain a current and clean police records report on file.

KNOWLEDGE & TECHNICAL COMPETENCE

Coach candidates are assessed by very experienced equestrian coaching professionals. In addition to demonstrating coaching and teaching ability, coaches and instructors must demonstrate a high standard of competence in horsemanship, horse care, horse training, riding, business and other skills. They must show proof of continuing professional development activities to maintain certification status.

SAFETY & FIRST AID

Trained in procedures, coaches hold a valid First Aid certificate which must be kept up to date for the coach to maintain certification.

COMMITMENT

Becoming certified and maintaining certification requires significant time and financial commitment on the part of the instructor/coach. Certification shows personal commitment to the sport and to giving their students the best they can.

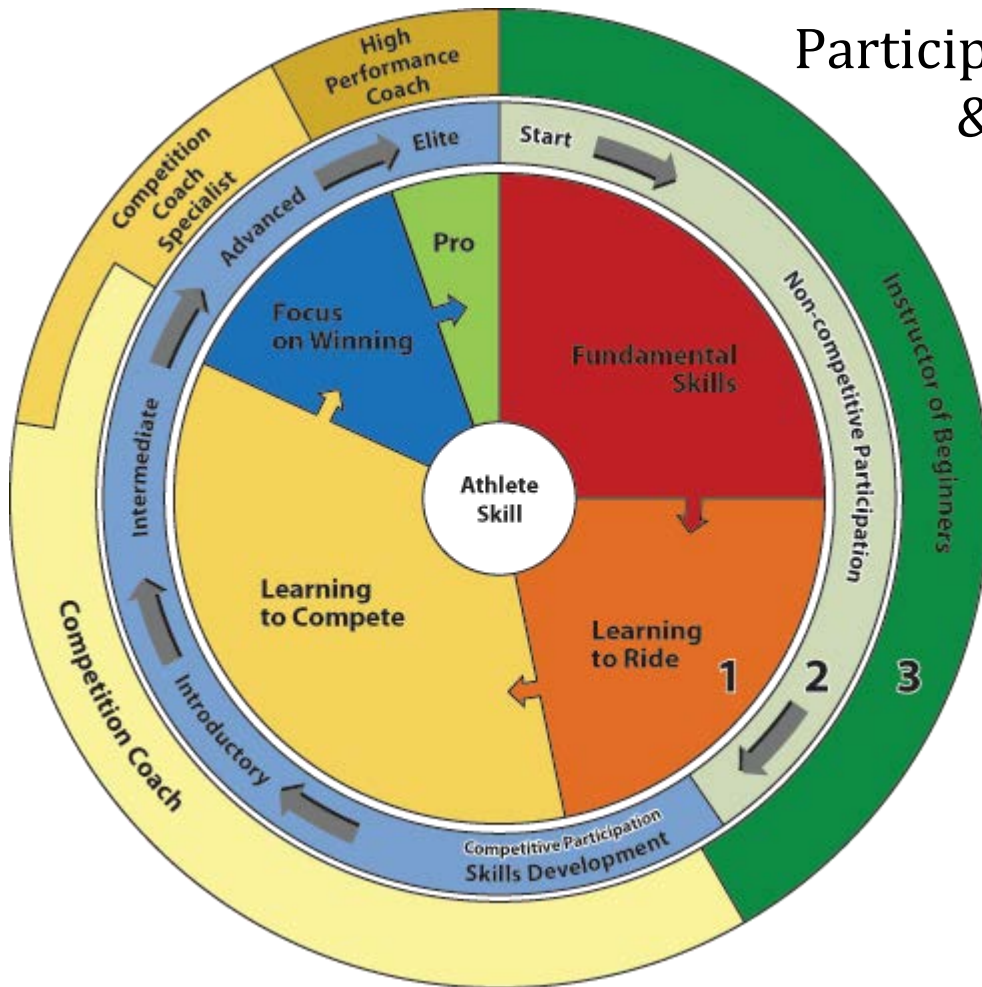
TEACHING & COACHING BEST PRACTICES

Certified Coaches and Instructors have been trained and tested on their specific ability to teach and coach human athletes, using techniques and practices upheld by Sport Canada as best standard for coaching for all major sports in Canada. The coaching development curriculum is aligned with standard sport science and coaching skill principles and practices.

CONFORMANCE

Conformance with growing requirement for and public expectation of certification in all amateur sports

Participant Involvement & Coach Selection



1. Identify your skill level in the inner circle.
2. Next, select your degree of competitive involvement.
3. Select the coach type that most fits your stage and context.
4. Find a current coach or instructor on the EC and provincial websites.

Athletes Progress, Coaches Specialize

Athlete Centred = As participant skill increases, the coaching context and degree of competitive involvement change. Choose a coach that specializes in the requirements of your context.

Coaching Certifications: Equal but Different. While competitive coaches do have to have prior experience as an athlete in their certification context, coaches seek certification that best describes the majority of their clients, not their own skills as an athlete. Coaching certificate type is not a hierarchy. The certificate type does not necessarily indicate a coach or instructors' years of experience, degree of expertise, or prior personal competitive experience.



EQUINE  HIPPIQUE
CANADA

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