THE BEAUTY AND ELEGANCE OF DRESSAGE HAS FOUND ITS PLACE IN INTERCOLLEGIATE COMPETITION, ALONGSIDE REINING AND CUTTING AND OTHER EQUESTRIAN EVENTS.
HORSEMANSHIP ISN'T JUST ABOUT ropin' and ridin' at Cal Poly.

The beauty and elegance of dressage has found its place in intercollegiate competition, alongside reining and cutting and other equestrian events.

Dressage in French means "training," but watching a horse and rider gliding along, you're bound to think "ballet." A skilled rider makes it look effortless, using leg pressure and weight changes so subtle, the cues are virtually invisible.

Control, balance and rhythm are what judges look for - horse and rider moving together in harmony, said team president Erin Lewis. "It's all about how the rider communicates with the horse.'

Communicating with the Animal Science Department about starting a dressage program was another matter. "I didn't know what dressage was;' said Department Head Andy Thulin. "I know all the competitors to ride.

Since Cal Poly doesn't have its own dressage horses, it's up to the team's "horse master," Elise Torres, to find suitable mounts. "Some trainers let us use their horses," said Torres, a sophomore city and regional planning major. "I usually start calling around three weeks ahead of time. Then I go out and ride the horses to determine their level of competition."

The day of the event is hectic. "We bathe the horses, braid them, clean tack - it's a big day," Torres said. "It's fun though, because we're all together."

There's a lot of sharing of clothes and equipment. They swap boots, coats, hats, crops. They laugh a lot and "oooh" and "ahh" everyone's appearance, especially the horses. "Look at Red, isn't he cute;' someone said about Torres' 12-year-old chestnut thoroughbred.

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reining cow horses. This was something totally new for me."

He credits Katie Dougherty (ASCI '04) with his enlightenment. "She came to me about four years ago, asking to start a team. She practically camped out in my office. Her perseverance paid off. The dressage team is a class act. They've really worked hard to get where they are today."

Dougherty and other students recruited UC Davis, UC Santa Cruz, UCLA and Fresno State in 2002 to create the Western Region of the national Intercollegiate Dressage Association. Since then, Cal Poly has been the regional champ three times. Last year the team finished eighth out of 57 teams in the national competition.

Not bad when you realize some students join the team without ever having tried dressage before; a few have never even been on a horse. They soon learn there's more to it than riding.

When a school sponsors a dressage event, its team does all the legwork, including rounding up a couple dozen horses for the competitors to ride.

Actual competition allows the riders just 10 minutes to warm-up the horses they've been assigned. Then they ride a prescribed U.S. Dressage Federation "test" that they've memorized.

"When you only have 10 minutes to build a relationship, it takes more than the animal's good looks to get the job done," said Sarah Von Brandt, an animal science senior. "It takes feel and skill because dressage is very technical. You can't fake it."

For now, the team practices and competes at an arena in Atascadero, but plans are under way for renovation of the campus Equine Center. A barn for mares, a stallion collection area, a round pen and hay barn have just been completed. Another barn with stalls, a covered arena, and classroom are on the drawing board.

"All I need is $1.5 million to finish the job," Thulin said. "We are now so impacted, we have no space for everything we want to do. I want the Equine Center to be a clean, functional workplace - a showplace we can be proud of."