

GRADES EXPLAINED

Welcome to the ST Evaluation Program, and in document I'll explain the different Grades we use in the program. Seeing the 'Bigger Picture' and beginning with the end in mind is part of your personal path to mastery, so let me walk you through all Grades, so you know what each Grade represents.

In each Training Pillar, you can submit five Touchstones to evaluate your ability in each Grade.

Briefly, a Grade represents the level of skill, and within each grade we focus on two dimensions:

- a) The quality of physical skill set
- b) The quality of the mental state

1. LEVEL OF SKILL

Each grade in a Training Pillar represents an overall level of skill which can be described in one word:

- 1) Grade 1 represents the **Novice** level of skill.
- 2) Grade 2 represents the **Elementary** level of skill
- 3) Grade 3 represents the **Competent** level of skill
- 4) Grade 4 represents the **Advanced** level of skill
- 5) Grade 5 represents the **Excellent** level of skill

Grade	Level of skill	Description
1	Novice	Grade 1 is level of 'novice' riders and horses, and it applies to a beginner horse or a beginner rider who is new to Straightness Training and just entered the ST Evaluation Program. This combination starts with the basis ST skills and basic ST exercises in all Training Pillars. Riders and horses who achieved Grade 1 in all Training Pillars have the necessary basic skills to perform basic Straightness Training exercises at a novice level.
2	Elementary	Grade 2 represents the 'elementary' level of skill, where rider and horse have the necessary ability to perform and integrate all elementary ST exercises in walk in all Training Pillars.
3	Competent	Riders and horses who achieved Grade 3 in all Training Pillars have the necessary ability to perform Straightness Training exercises in trot on a competent level.
4	Advanced	At Grade 4, rider and horse have greatly developed beyond the elementary and competent level all the way up to the 'advanced' level where they have the necessary ability to perform more difficult work in canter.
5	Excellent	Riders and horses who achieved Grade 5 in all Training Pillars have the necessary ability to perform ST in an excellent way. They have an 'excellent' level of skill and are remarkably good in the most difficult exercises and perform these with outstanding and extraordinary quality.

1A. QUALITY OF SKILL SET

When it comes to the quality of skill set, each Grade has its focus on a main skill set with a certain quality:

Grade	Main skill set	Description
1	Basic skills	Grade 1 is about learning, teaching and mastering the basic Straightness Training skills in isolation. This Grade is about correct tool fitting and handling. It's also about correct timing and dosing of aids and cues while practicing the first three keys of ST – the Lateral Bending, Forward down, and Stepping Under (LFS) - and the corresponding basic ST exercises.
2	Integration of fundamentals	At the Elementary level, rider and horse are able to perform all elementary exercises with quality in the performance, which means an integration of Balance, Suppleness, a proper Shape, a normal Tempo and a regular Rhythm (BSSTR). At this level, the horse moves with a lateral bend in the body, a forward down tendency of the head and neck, and the inside hind leg is well connected to the well-positioned center of mass (LFS). Now this combined with a normal tempo and regular rhythm leads to a well moving horse in a state of relaxed activity. This level is also about an integrated use of aids: mental, energetic, seat, leg, rein, voice, and whip aids. Plus, all exercises are integrated in a sequence.
3	Connection & Collection	In Grade 3, all different kinds of half-halts come through very well to establish connection and collection. Connection is about connecting the horse from behind, over the back, towards the rider's hand while the horse is always stretched in the topline, yielding to and searching towards the hand. In collection, the weight is shifted backwards, the horse is lowering the haunches and therefore freeing the shoulders. This leads to self-carriage where the horse is light in front, without losing the connection from behind.
4	Athletic horse & rider	The advanced Grade 4 is performed by an athletic horse and an athletic rider. Both are physically strong and fit, and both have the required mobility, agility, and stamina to perform the more difficult work in canter, while integrating all six keys of Straightness Training.
5	Masterpiece	When love and skill work together a masterpiece can be expected which is a work of outstanding skill, craftsmanship and artistry.

1B. QUALITY OF MENTAL STATE

Each Grade has its focus on a certain quality of the horse's mental state:

Grade	Mental state	Description
1	Responsive	At the level of Grade 1, the horse is in a calm, responsive and obedient state. The horse understands and responds to the aids and cues, not ignoring or resisting the rider's request.
2	Searching	At the level of Grade 2, the horse is in a respectful, attentive, searching state. The horse knows there's something in it for him – such as a release, a reward, or a moment of relaxation – therefore the horse is cooperative and in a searching state.
3	Figuring out	At the level of Grade 3, the horse is in an open, present, focused, and positive 'figuring out' state. Rider and horse connect very well on a mental level and the horse starts to offer not only self-carriage in the body, but also in the mind. The horse shows intrinsic motivation to figure out what the rider wants and puts effort in the performance - even when the rider is are running out of treats or the horse is getting tired.
4	Best Aikido	At the level of Grade 4, the athletic horse and the athletic rider have an attitude of giving their 'Best Aikido' to help each other improve. Both perform to the best of their ability to achieve growth and harmony.
5	Synchronicity	At the level of Grade 5, horse and rider are reading each other's minds, they are united in a bubble of fused energy, they operate as a school of fish, synchronizing in harmony, and moving as one.

2. GRADE OVERVIEW

Grade	Overall level of skill	Quality of skill set	Quality of mental state
1	Novice	Basic skills	Responsive
2	Elementary	Integration of fundamentals	Searching
3	Competent	Connection & Collection	Figuring out
4	Advanced	Athletic horse & rider	Best Aikido
5	Excellent	Masterpiece	Synchronicity

Of course, it's perfectly fine and it's warmly embraced if you and your horse already have the ability to integrate a quality of the higher grades when operating on the lower grades. If you can already integrate little details of the higher grades, your training will progress much more smoothly. Therefore it's important to begin with the end in mind, it gives direction to your daily training activities.

3. TOUCHSTONES WITHIN EACH GRADE

If you would like to know which ST exercises are part of each Grade in each Training Pillar, please check out the Touchstone Overview that can be downloaded on the ST Evaluation website.

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