

Dressage:

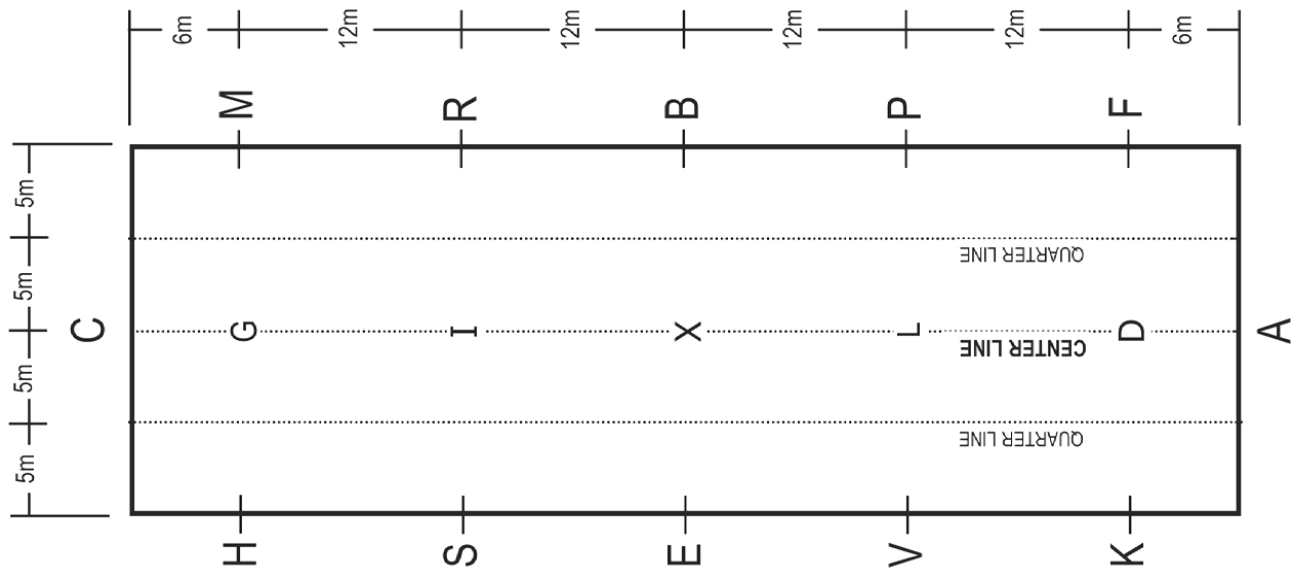
The execution by a trained horse of precision movements in response to barely perceptible signals from its rider.

DRESSAGE ARENA GEOMETRY

The competition arenas

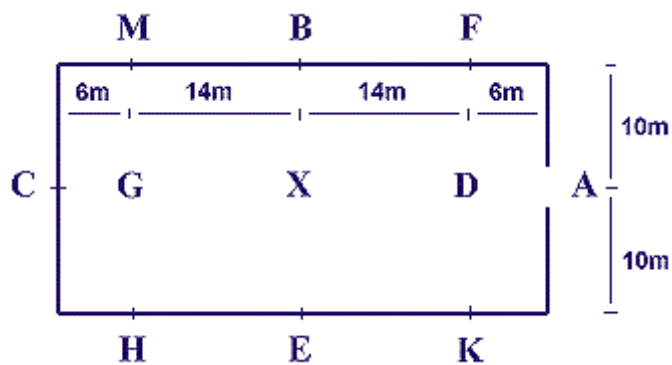
Standard (large) dressage arena

20m x 60m



Small dressage arena

20m x 40m

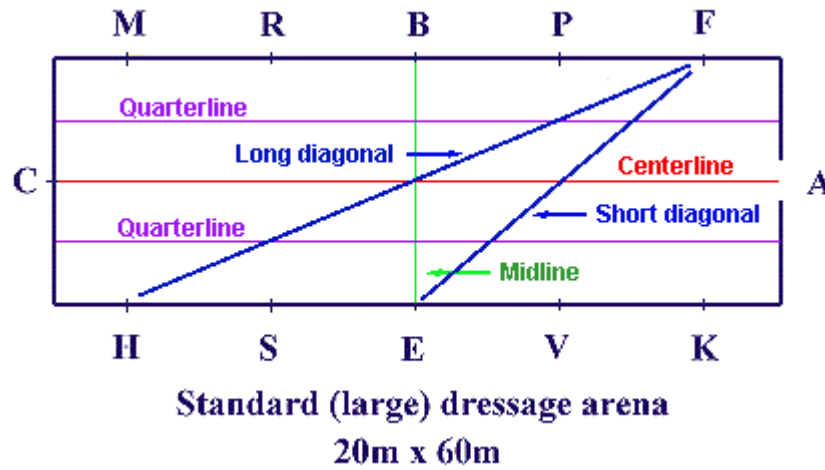


Some approximate conversions from meters to feet:

- 6 meters = 19 feet
- 10 meters = 33 feet
- 20 meters = 66 feet
- 40 meters = 132 feet
- 60 meters = 198 feet

A "map" of the dressage arena

Below you'll find a diagram of the various parts of a dressage arena. The small arena lines pretty much coincide with the large arena lines -- it's just that, due to its shorter dimensions, the small arena lines have sharper angles.



The **centerline** (shown in red) runs straight down the middle of the arena longways from A to C. The letters situated on the centerline in the large arena, beginning at the entrance to the arena, are A, D, L, X, I, G and C. In the small arena the centerline letters are A, D, X, G and C.

The **quarterlines** (shown in purple) run straight down the arena longways, halfway between the rail and the centerline on either side. There are no letters indicating the position of the quarterlines.

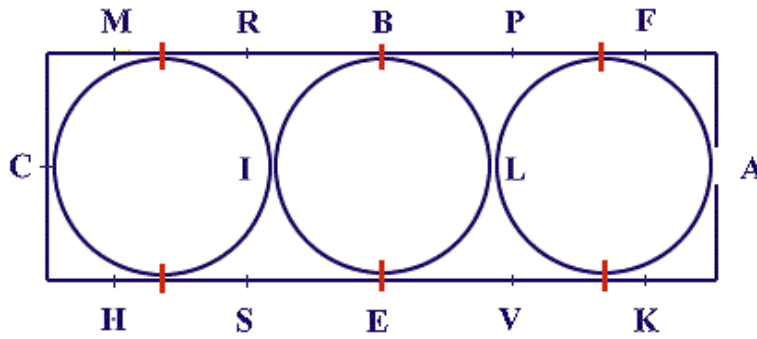
The **midline** (shown in green) runs straight from E, through X, to B.

The **diagonals** (shown in blue) can be ridden in a myriad of ways -- only two are shown here.

- The long diagonals are ridden from corner letter to corner letter. The naming convention includes mention of X, the letter situated in the center of the arena. Therefore, the long diagonals are FXH, HXF, MXK and KXM.
- The short diagonals offer even more options. Some variations are F-E (or E-F), M-E (or E-M), H-B, K-B, R-V, and S-P.

The 20m circle in the large arena

The first, and arguably the easiest, circle to ride in dressage tests is the 20m circle. This movement is required through Second Level in U.S. dressage tests and is performed at the trot and canter. Circles are supposed to be round, which means the horse turns the same amount at each stride. This is harder than it sounds, especially if your horse is plagued by "rail magnets": once he's on the rail he doesn't want to come off! There should be no straight lines or corners involved in riding circles. At those points of the circle which are tangent to the rail, the horse should take only one or two steps on the rail before leaving it to follow the track of the circle.



Standard (large) dressage arena
20m x 60m

Look at the diagram above. You can see that in the large arena, which is 20 meters wide and 60 meters long (check your [arena diagrams](#) if you're unsure of the arena dimensions), there is room for 3 separate 20m circles. When riding a 20 meter circle which begins and ends at C or A, you should leave the rail as you pass the letter. (Some people say you're "at" the letter when your horse's shoulder is next to the letter; others say you're at the letter when your body passes it. It's a pretty fine point -- probably either will work. Just be consistent.)

As you continue on the circle, you'll touch the rail at a point 10 meters from the end of the arena. These points are indicated in the diagram by the red markers. If your circle begins at B or E, you touch the rail for a moment at each of these letters before continuing on the circle.

Remember that the corner letters (M, F, H, K) are only 6 meters from the end of the ring. When riding 20 meter circles at A or C, you need to touch the rail 4 meters *beyond* those letters.

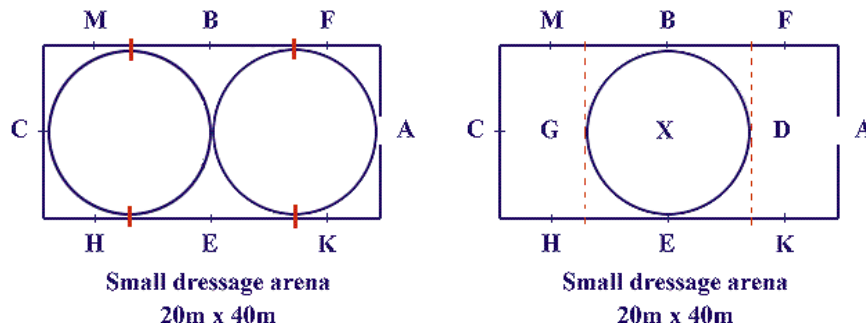
It's a good idea, before it's time to enter the arena for competition, to find some sort of landmark to help you determine where the 10 meter point is. Look for an arena post or pylon, a clump of grass, a rock or a pile of manure -- anything that will help you judge where to touch the rail on each side of your circle.

For circles at A or C, you cross the centerline 20 meters from A or C (seems obvious, doesn't it?). If you know that the corner letters are 6 meters from the end of the ring, and that the next set of letters is another 12 meters down the long side, you can find an approximate crossing place for your circle. Find the S-R line for a circle at C (the V-L line for a circle at A) and aim to cross the centerline 2 meters *beyond* that line.

You'll use those same points to find where to cross the centerline for a 20 meter circle at E or B. You'll want to cross the centerline 10 meters on either side of X: the radius of your 20 meter circle is 10 meters. Remember that I and L are 12 meters from X. Aim for the centerline 2 meters to the *inside* of those letters for a great 20 meter circle.

The 20m circle in the small arena

Riding a 20 meter circle in the small arena is no different than riding one in the large arena -- the circle size is the same, only the landmarks change.



Small dressage arena
20m x 40m

Small dressage arena
20m x 40m

Circles at A and C: In the small arena, just like the large, the corner letters (H, K, M, F) are six meters from the end of the arena. Therefore, your 20 meter circles at A and C touch the long sides of the arena 4 meters beyond the corner letters. However, in the small arena you cross the centerline exactly at X.

Usually it's pretty easy to find X in the small arena at competitions. Remember, everyone halts there -- look for the spot with the most hoofprints (and manure piles!).

Circles at B and E: When riding a circle which begins at B or E, your horse's shoulders should leave the track as they pass the letter. Remember to counteract those "rail magnets" by warning your horse ahead of time that you're planning to turn.

You'll cross the centerline 10 meters on either side of X. You can eyeball a spot halfway between X and A, and halfway between X and C, to find that spot. Or, look for that magic 4-meters-beyond-the-corner-letters spot, and cross the centerline opposite that. (The corner letters are 6 meters from the end of the ring. Add another 4 meters to find the ten meter mark. From that mark, it's another 10 meters to E or B.)

Again, it's a good idea to look for landmarks before you enter the competition arena.

So how accurate do I have to be, anyway?

Please don't be misled. Accuracy is not everything.

At home:

When you're working at home you should always try to be as accurate as possible. You have to balance accuracy, however, against your horse's development and training. A new movement performed well is better than a new movement performed poorly at a letter.

That is to say, when a horse is first learning a new movement or figure, accuracy will suffer. It's like any other learning process: you start out awkward and end up good. When you were learning to play the piano or throw a ball, you were not expected from the beginning to hit the right keys or the strike zone every time. But as you became more practiced, you worked for more accuracy. Yet you tried to balance that accuracy with power, rhythm and sensitivity. Riding is no different.

Horses are always looking for the easiest way to perform. This is not to say that horses cheat -- they are for the most part incredibly generous. But they don't necessarily understand that there's a better or more correct way to perform a gait or movement. They're just as happy to go crooked and uneven, especially if they've always gone that way.

Requiring accuracy is a good way to ensure correct straightness and evenness. Can you ride the centerline or quarterline without drifting? Can you return to the rail at the same spot you left when riding a circle? Can you perform a transition at a letter? If so, you're well on your way to improving your horse's carriage and physique.

At the shows:

In dressage competition, where you are required to perform specific movements at specific places in the arena, your scores will suffer if you're careless about your arena geometry. On the other hand, your scores will also suffer if you sacrifice balance, rhythm and brilliance for the sake of a deep corner or a square turn. Your ride should resemble a beautiful dance -- an accurate but mechanical, lifeless ride is not the goal of a good dressage rider.

You do your horse a disservice if you only require accuracy at the shows. Your poor horse has enough to deal with: new surroundings, new feeding and riding schedules, new footing, new stabling. You can't control those changes, but you *can* control the way you ride. To ask your horse to suddenly produce a new level of accuracy only compounds his discomfort.

If you ride accurately at home your horse will not be disconcerted by accuracy at the shows. You don't necessarily need to drill entire dressage tests, but you should try to put together series of movements. And practice being accurate for 5 to 10 minutes at a stretch -- the length of an average dressage test.

Now go out there and ride accurately! You'll be pleasantly surprised. I promise.