

Revisiting Achievement

Everyone agrees that achievement is the basis of our modern judging philosophy. The real question is whether or not we do more than give it passive lip-service when we attend clinics. At issue is the utilization of the principle of achievement in our digital dialogue and for our cassette commentary during competitions. If we truly adhere to achievement as an important premise, why is it that our community (judges and instructors) apparently seldom mention it? Can we as judges give fair reward if we don't mention achievement? These are intriguing questions about a principle that depends on the experience, the practice, and the ability of the judge. Importantly, our community believes that if the judge understands achievement, the measure of any subcaption will be more complete, more equitable, and more in-keeping with our written philosophy.

The motivation for achievement as the basis of excellence was a simple premise. In the years prior to achievement, units taught what they could clean beyond question. While this certainly fitted the times, it also limited creativity. This is not to say that we now pay no attention to precision simply to permit unlimited creativity. Achievement is not the signal to sacrifice precision rather we do consider that there is now more understanding about what students do. Indeed, there is a certain amount of elasticity to precision. In short, precision is relative to what is being performed. Giving formal consideration to the responsibility of the performer was the beginning of the conversation of “what” and “how”.

In watching any performance from among the works of Graham, Balanchine, Alvin Ailey, or Mark Morris, one notices that events are not purely precise. The ability of those choreographers and their companies to produce programs that were remarkably creative and well-performed has entertained the public for years. Only the most cynical observer would watch the signature “Revelations” of Ailey and complain that the lines weren't straight or that all the feet weren't pointed in the same direction. At the same time, these programs were not so sloppy as to overwhelm the artistic and aesthetic basis on which they were founded. No, there was balance. The balance is that the creativity shone while the performers did their work with evident training, grace and consummate artistic integrity. Additionally, there is a precision that neither interferes with the emotional content nor inhibited the performers from releasing an inner energy while presenting a completely understandable concept.

For pageantry, we know that the basis of modern judging is the principle of achievement. We have often called it “derived achievement” to acknowledge the consideration of the responsibilities of the student. ***The score for excellence is derived from considering the responsibility while simultaneously considering the training and the precision.***

How then do we present the principle of achievement as a kind of living document, a living principle?

It doesn't need to be overly complicated. There certainly will be a misunderstanding if the only measure of excellence is precision, pure and absolute. In reality, we often give the impression that we are judging primarily precision, especially if we don't attempt to recognize -- or fail to recognize -- what it is that the student is doing.

We do realize that many instructors are anxious to hear about the "what" of the program early in the season. Indeed, some indicate that they know that the program is not being performed very well. They will often continue by saying, "we'll take care of those things in rehearsal". While we all make an effort to give the instructors the information they want, we should not quickly abandon achievement under the pretext of giving satisfaction to the instructors. The fact is that if we judge achievement properly, we do give them a measure of their programs. Properly balancing the "what" and the "how" is something that not only we must practice but also that the instructors should understand. The eternal "it" is not about their programs but about the proper balance of "what" and "how".

Another major issue is that judges often are worried about those first reads. Let's face it: many of the contests we judge are all about first readings of programs. Still, we should not overly concentrate on the "what" nor should we tilt dramatically towards the "how" simply because it is a first read. WGI judges are well-schooled and have a great deal of experience. The proper approach to first reads and all other contexts is achievement, which is about a balance on our tapes. Don't worry that someone will listen to your tapes and make a list to assure that your dialogue is 50-50 "what" and "how". We do wish to avoid what is often a dramatic imbalance of "what" commentary coupled with comments that revolve primarily around precision and "clean".

With practice, we can work towards the ideal. Making double-tapes is a good place to begin. We can listen to our commentary and take note of the number of times we reference the principle of achievement, which must include reference to the responsibilities of the student. You can use adjectives and modifiers such as, "with an eye towards what the students are doing, part of rehearsal time might be devoted to this passage of form change and expansion, which likely can be presented with better achievement." How about, "these students have an extraordinary challenge in the rifle feature and they seem to understand what is needed to achieve the highest levels of success even if they are currently struggling a bit." We might say, "The moderate challenges of the form change really can be met with greater success". You can offer, "It is unfortunate that one student struggled in the very challenging saber feature but the wider picture indicates significant training and significant responsibilities."

Of course, most of us (perhaps all of us) own DVD's of recent performances. Those DVD's give us significant opportunities to practice recognizing and verbalizing achievement. Indeed, we've used the DVD's as learning tools in the past. While it need not be formal to the extent that we submit such tapes, we can practice in the comfort of our living rooms. There are many euphemisms for achievement. Why not use them?

The major benefit for judges would be the presentation of dialogue that would have better balance and would exhibit a broader understanding of the program of any unit. Though we would hope for an equal understanding of achievement from the instructors, our concentration ought to be on our work. Indeed, if we model achievement, the instructors will also gain in both the short and long run of the season.

WGI has published guidelines for achievement and the scoring. Please do examine the numerical guidelines that discuss how the two sub-captions on the sheets interact. Also, examine the general guidelines that help give value and meaning to the tenth and spreads.

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