



## CLASSIFICATION 101

### 1. What is Classification?

Classification provides athletes with a physical disability the opportunity to compete against other athletes with similar abilities. Athletes are assessed by accredited ‘classifiers’ and are given a “Grade” based on their functional abilities in areas such as: muscle power, joint range, and coordination. There are five Grades of competitions in Para-Dressage, with Grade IA representing the more severely impaired athletes, and Grade IV representing the least severely impaired athletes.

Para-Equestrian Canada classifies/assesses athletes in accordance with the methods and standards of the Fédération équestre internationale (FEI), as outlined in the FEI Classification Manual. Athletes can only request to be classified once they are ready to compete at Equine Canada Silver and Gold Level.

At each Grade athletes may receive approval to use specific compensatory aids during competition, which would be listed on the athlete’s classification card. The purpose of compensatory aids (sometimes known as adaptive tack or specialized equipment) is to level the competitive playing field. Examples of compensatory aids include: rubber bands to stirrups, two whips, etc. While compensatory aids are varied and can be unique to an athlete, they should never provide an advantage to the athlete.

Many Para-Equestrian athletes also compete alongside able-bodied competitors in Equine Canada competitions. At the grass-roots level, Para-Equestrian encompasses a number of different disciplines, while the international stream focuses only on Para-Equestrian Dressage. Athletes are judged on their riding skill against other athletes of the same Grade when competing, regardless of their impairment.

### 2. How is a Grade allocated to a rider?

A Grade is allocated through a series of rider evaluations by classifiers called Bench Tests, which measure functional abilities in areas such as: muscle power, joint range, and coordination. Each Classifier is trained and certified following the criteria specified by the Fédération équestre internationale. Classifiers for Para-Equestrian sport are either medical doctors or physiotherapists. Riders with a visual impairment are classified by classifiers with a background in ophthalmology or optometry.

Only certified classifiers can determine a rider’s grade. It is not the responsibility of a coach or trainer to determine or recommend the grade of a rider. Rider’s wishing to compete in the Para-Equestrian Canada Video Competition Series and at Equine Canada Bronze level, should perform the tests which best suits their current skill level.

After the classification process is complete, the classifier will calculate the rider’s profile and grade following the classification rules outlined by the Fédération équestre internationale. This process may take a few weeks as the profile and grade must be verified by the Canadian Para-Equestrian Classification Committee before being communicated to a rider.



Once a profile and grade have been approved, a rider will be notified by Para-Equestrian Canada and will be provided with a Para-Equestrian Athlete Classification Card. This card will also list the compensating aids (also known as adaptive tack or specialized equipment) approved by the classifier during the classification process.

Depending on the impairment a rider might undergo classification several times throughout his or her career. Some impairments change over time, e.g. visual acuity might decrease over time or hypertonia may increase. Also, junior athletes may not yet have reached skeletal maturity by the time of first classification. In these cases, classifiers can decide when a rider has to be seen again to be re-classified.

### 3. When is a rider classified?

Riders can only request to be classified when they have reached the level to compete at Equine Canada Silver and Gold Level. Riders wishing to compete in Equine Canada Bronze level competitions may do so using the Equine Canada Para-Equestrian Medical Form.

Classification must take place before competitions. Therefore, riders who need to be classified must notify Para-Equestrian Canada **at least 3 months before** their first Silver/Gold level competition to ensure the process is completed in plenty of time to allow them to compete.

Riders wishing to be classified by the Fédération équestre internationale must hold a Para-Equestrian Athlete Classification Card and be ranked on Para-Equestrian Canada's Long List.

### 4. What are the eligible impairments?

At the international and national level, Para-Equestrian sport offers opportunities for riders with physical and visual impairments and these can be divided into 9 eligible impairment types. At the national level, riders with an intellectual impairment are also offered the opportunity to compete.

There are eight different types of physical impairments:

- Impaired muscle power: With impairments in this category, the force generated by muscles, such as the muscles of one limb, one side of the body or the lower half of the body is reduced, e.g. due to spinal-cord injury, spina bifida or polio.
- Impaired passive range of movement: Range of movement in one or more joints is reduced in a systematic way, e.g. arthrogryposis. Acute conditions such as osteoarthritis are not included.
- Loss of limb or limb deficiency: There is a total or partial absence of bones or joints as a consequence of amputation due to illness or trauma or congenital limb deficiency (e.g. dysmelia).
- Leg-length difference: Significant bone shortening occurs in one leg due to congenital deficiency or trauma.
- Short stature: Standing height is reduced due to shortened legs, arms and trunk, which are due to a musculoskeletal deficit in the bone or cartilage structures.



- **Hypertonia:** Hypertonia is marked by an abnormal increase in muscle tension and reduced ability of a muscle to stretch. Hypertonia may result from injury, disease, or conditions which involve damage to the central nervous system (e.g. cerebral palsy).
- **Ataxia:** Ataxia is an impairment that consists of a lack of co-ordination of muscle movements (e.g. cerebral palsy, Friedreich's ataxia).
- **Athetosis:** Athetosis is generally characterized by unbalanced, involuntary movements and a difficulty maintaining a symmetrical posture (e.g. cerebral palsy, choreoathetosis).

Riders with a visual impairment are also included:

- **Visual impairment:** Visual Impairment occurs when there is damage to one or more of the components of the vision system, which can include:
  - impairment of the eye structure/receptors
  - impairment of the optic nerve/optic pathways
  - impairment of the visual cortex

In Para-Equestrian Dressage, riders must be totally blind or have a visual acuity of less than 2/60 or visual field of less than 5 degrees to be eligible, if no other physical impairments exist.

Riders with an Intellectual Impairment may compete at national level competitions only: These riders are limited in regards to intellectual functions and their adaptive behaviour, which is diagnosed before the age of 18 years.

Riders may also be given two profiles if more than one impairment exists, with the (more severe) combined impairment determining the grade at which they compete.

Not all riders who have a disability are eligible for classification. Impairments caused by pain, or change from day to day, or any of the following conditions cannot be classified when no other eligible impairment exists - Wear and tear due to advancing age, general debilitating disease, obesity, osteochondritis, psychiatric conditions, skin diseases, haemophilia, epilepsy, respiratory conditions, fatigue as in fibromyalgia and myalgic encephalitis, vertigo or dizziness, internal organ dysfunction or absence, visual acuity of above 2/60 or visual field of above 5 degrees, and cardiac/circulatory conditions.

In addition, riders must have more than a 15% loss of power, range or coordination in any limb or the trunk to be eligible for classification.

## 5. What are the Grades for Para-Equestrian Sport?

In Para-Equestrian Dressage there the five grades for riders with physical and visual impairments which have been developed by the Fédération équestre internationale outlined below. Lower grades indicate more severe activity limitations and higher grades include athletes with less severe activity limitations.



**Grade Ia:** Physical impairments

Riders in Grade 1a have severe impairments of all limbs and poor trunk control, which usually necessitate the athlete to use a wheelchair in daily life.

**Grade Ib:** Physical impairments

Riders in Grade Ib have either severely reduced trunk control and minimally impaired upper limbs or moderate impairments of the upper and lower limbs and the trunk. Most riders in this class use a wheelchair in daily life.

**Grade II:** Physical impairments

Riders in Grade II have a very limited ability in both lower limbs and a good trunk balance, or milder limitations in upper and lower limbs with reduced trunk control. For example, an athlete with a severe impairment in one arm and one leg on opposite sides and good trunk and hip control is likely to compete in Grade II. Some riders in this class use a wheelchair in daily life.

**Grade III:** Physical and visual impairment

Riders in Grade III are able to walk, but have a severe impairment in both arms or have no arms, a moderate impairment of all four limbs or short stature. This grade also includes athletes with no sight.

**Grade IV:** Physical and visual impairment

Comprises of Riders with impaired range of motion or muscle strength, deficiency on one limb or mild deficiency on two limbs. Moreover, riders with reduced vision or a restricted visual field compete in this grade.

Impairments which do not meet the eligibility criteria, such as Intellectual Impairment, or conditions which are difficult to measure objectively, will be classed as a Grade V. Grade V riders can compete against non-disabled riders with the use of the compensating aids listed on their Para-Equestrian Athlete Classification Card.

In Para-Equestrian Driving there are two grades for riders with physical disabilities only.

**Grade CD I:** Wheelchair users with poor trunk balance and impairment in upper limbs, or those who are able to walk but with impairment of function in all four limbs, or those with severe arm impairment only.

**Grade CD II:** Those with less impairment than Grade CD I, yet are functionally disadvantaged against able bodied drivers.



## 6. What are Compensating (adaptive) aids?

Compensating (adaptive) aids are used by riders to compensate for the physical or sensory limitation resulting from their impairment, thereby enabling them to ride a horse. For example, a hand hold on the front of the saddle enables someone with a high level spinal cord injury to balance on the horse.

A compensating aid is not to be used to compensate for lack of riding skill or provide an advantage to the rider as an aid to enhance the horse's performance - this would be considered a training aid. The well-being of the horse is paramount in considering the use of any compensating aid.

A full list of approved compensating aids can be found here (please note that this is a large document and may take a while to download).

## 7. What is the Equine Canada Para-Equestrian Medical Form?

The Para-Equestrian Medical Form is designed to allow competitors with a physical, visual, learning impairment and hearing loss to compete at Equine Canada Bronze level competitions with the use of compensating aids.

The form must be completed by the rider and coach, listing the approved compensating aids required for competition and riders must submit a copy of their Medical Form (which lists their compensating aids) with their entries and carry a copy of the form with them at all times while on the competition grounds.

The Diagnosis Information Form must be completed by a doctor of medicine, clearly stating the rider's medical condition/diagnosis. A copy of this form must be sent to Equine Canada for their records which will be securely stored.

[Click here to download a copy of the form.](#)

## 8. How do I request to be classified?

Before you can request to be classified, you must be actively competing in Equine Canada sanctioned Bronze competitions and pursuing competition at the Silver and Gold level in the immediate future.

You need to check that you meet the minimal disability criteria and have an eligible impairment as outlined above and in the FEI Classification Manual. You also need to be a current member in good standing of Equine Canada and Para-Equestrian Canada.

If you meet these requirements, you can then contact Para-Equestrian Canada at [para-equestrian@equestrian.ca](mailto:para-equestrian@equestrian.ca) or +1 613-287-1515 ext 143 to request the National Para-Equestrian Canada Classification Package.



The Classification Package must be read and signed by you and your coach to ensure you have fully understood the process. A 'Certificate of Diagnosis of a Physical Impairment' must also be completed by a doctor of medicine, clearly stating the medical diagnosis of your impairment. The doctor should not list symptoms.

Riders with a visual impairment must also submit a medical certificate of their impairment from an optometrist or ophthalmologist.

[Para-Equestrian Canada Classification Policy and Procedures \(2015\)](#)