

Day 4:

Today we had our lessons with the fourth of the four instructors. Mine today was with Debbie McDonald, which I was extremely excited about because she is one of my all-time favorite teachers.

After morning rituals and our second-to-last workout with Bob (consisting of lots of lunges, a sprinting relay, frog jumps, burpees, etc), lessons with Debbie and Shelly Francis began. Again, I rode at 11 so I didn't get to watch too many lessons. I did, however, have a fantastic lesson with Debbie. She is always so good at pinpointing exactly what needs to be worked on. I have worked with her several times before, so we were familiar with each other, which made it much easier to go right to work even on a horse I am not totally familiar with. Some notes from my lesson--

- Sunny was not all the way over his back. Before I was allowed to drive him forward, she made me get him to release in his neck and back. To do this, she had me bring his canter back rather than drive forward and use the outside half-halt without worrying too much if he was going slow. When he was "begging to stretch" and released over his back, she had me straighten him and then I could drive as much as I wanted, as long as he stayed over the back.
- The contact Debbie had me ride in today was somewhere in between where Robert had me ride it and where Jan had me ride it. She wanted me to release, but when I did so he was supposed to reach for the contact. I love Debbie's style of teaching because as a small person, this style of "finesse riding" works really well for me.
- When I had a bit of issues with my flying changes, Debbie had me focus on the quality of the canter. Sunny would have a beautiful canter, and then he would hit the diagonal and would change his canter. She told me not to ride the change until I felt that his canter was staying the same on the diagonal, at which point the changes came right through.
- When riding the half-passes, Debbie had me ride both shoulder in and leg yield off the outside leg to make sure he was responding to both legs and I could ride in a soft contact in the reins.

Our first lecturer of the day was from farrier Don Later, who gave us insight to why we shoe horses and proper shoeing of performance horses. We shoe horses for protection and for traction in the dirt. The horse's foot is a dynamic entity; every time the horse lands, the foot and the frog expands. Therefore, the best shoeing for a horse is generally the most basic shoeing-- a regular, well fitted shoe. If a horse is always shod right, corrective shoeing should not be necessary. Don emphasized that if your horse is sound, the angles are right and the shoes are staying on, don't change anything. Things that can influence a horse's feet are nutrition, footing, moisture, environment, and stall cleanliness. If a horse tends to have problems with their feet, he suggested feeding them rice bran, as he has found it to be just as if not more effective than hoof supplements.

The second lecturer of the day was youth coach Jeremy Steinberg. He gave us some dressage theory and training tips that were very helpful. First we talked about the training scale, which, from the bottom to the top of the pyramid, is: Rhythm, suppleness, contact, straightening, impulsion, and collection. A few notes on the pyramid: it is important that "straightening" is used rather than "straightness" because all horses will have a weaker side, and riding the horse completely straight won't help solve this imbalance. Lateral work can be used, which puts bend in the body, to strengthen the weaker side and work towards a straighter horse. Also, straightening and impulsion can be interchangeable on the pyramid. Impulsion is defined not just as forward energy, but also as lift of the forehand, which is an important aspect of engagement. Two things that are not on the pyramid which one might expect to be there are relaxation and looseness. The reason that there are not on the pyramid is that these things cannot be forced; in other words, these things are a byproduct of the other aspects of the pyramid. You cannot force your horse to be relaxed or loose, but you can in a sense force him to be rhythmic, supple, etc. Another interesting thing Jeremy talked about was utilizing a horse's flight instinct and learning by association. Since the goal of dressage is to use invisible aids, we teach them to respond to small, invisible aids. If you put your leg on a green horse and they do not go forward, then you punish them with a spank with the whip, you have trained by association that when you put your leg on you want to go forward and if that does not happen, there is a painful consequence. This is essentially how we teach our horses all the way to Grand Prix; our horses do not understand the concepts that we are trying to teach them, but through repetitive training by association, we can teach them to respond to universal cues.

After yet another long but amazing day, I am in my hotel room for the last time tonight realizing this experience is almost over. It has been so amazing and I am looking forward to riding a test for Linda Zang tomorrow. I cannot thank the people that have made this opportunity possible enough. This program is fantastic and is definitely something I will remember throughout my riding career.

- Jamie Pestana