

## **Florida Dream Tour**

Thanks to Dressage4Kids I was able to attend the Florida Dream Tour hosted by the Dressage Foundation. The day was based off and supported the International Dream Program, which sends ambitious young riders to Europe to observe elite dressage training facilities. However, the Dream Tour had no restrictions on who could participate, allowing dressage enthusiasts of all ages to take part, and the participants visited 4 stables of professionals working in the Wellington area.

Stillpoint Farm owned by Tuny Page, Four Winds Farm owned by John and Leslie Malone, Yeguada de Ymas owned by Javier Bacariza and Cristina Daguillencourt, and Roundabout Stables owned by Patricia Stempel were all on the agenda for the day. Watching these professionals at work was informative, demonstrated amazing riding, and, as an up-and-coming rider, I was extremely grateful to spend the day observing. Watching great riding is crucial to achieving great riding. It provides riders a visual of excellence and promotes a high standard.

And with this high standard of riding came a common thread; the importance of a variety in work and special attention to each horses needs. While each instructor and rider had a slightly different approach to the horses, their goals were nearly the same- to produce supple, attentive, and relaxed athletes performing at their best. Here is an overview of what each stable had to offer.

### **Stillpoint Farm**

At Stillpoint international competitors Tuny Page, Christilot Boylen, Lara Griffith, Laura Bechtolsheimer-Tomlinson demonstrated while Dr. Bechtolsheimer taught.

For many of the horses at Stillpoint, it was a light day of work. Tuny Page used the day to focus on transitions between gaits and within the gaits, making the horse responsive, on the aids, and working through the body. When she would work the horse in collected work, she would take care to allow the horse to stretch after. This relaxed the muscles and gave the horse a reward, especially after very collected canter work, which she equated to people doing crunches or an abdominal workout.

Christilot Boylen, a 7 time Olympian for Canada, had much wisdom to share. She was quick to explain her motto that practice doesn't make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect, a lesson she applies riding each day.

While doing a light school on her Grand Prix horse, Christilot demonstrated the importance of riding with 2 legs and 2 reins in a basic exercise of leg-yield head to wall. She explained how the exercise quickly shows what the rider is doing and how it affects the horses body and alignment and continued to explain its usefulness in training. Alongside that, Christilot stressed that horses must be supple 2 ways; laterally (side to side) and longitudinally (over their back), and that as riders we must be able to check the horse's balance by giving the rein and seeing if they can balance themselves.

Lara, who has worked with the Bechtolshiemers since 2010, rode with Dr. Bechtolshiemer in a lesson. To warm her large horse up, she allowed the horse to stretch, then worked the shoulder in, renvers, and travers in the trot, and throughout the lesson rode many transitions. Watching her work with Dr. B allowed auditors to see the communication between rider and trainer. When the horse was over eager practicing the canter zig-zag, she made the horse wait and explained the excitement from the horse to Dr. B. Working with the Grand Prix horse, she rode lovely and well-executed trot piaffe trot transitions, which helped engage him more, and would frequently ask him to sit very collected for a few strides then ride out in trot and canter.

Laura Bechtolsheimer was riding a large mare that Dr. Bechtolsheimer explained, like many horses, benefited from warming up in the canter. He explained that “the horse dictates the pace of training”, and that it was important to have an individualized plan for working each horse. He also explained that the horses get out 2 times a day horses, once to hack, go on aqua treadmill, etc, and once to work. This allowed the horses to have variety and improve their fitness.

Dr. B worked with the riders then explained to us auditors something that I find to be very true about training horses; being a trainer is like being a kindergarten teacher. You have to be patient and often think, “how can I make it easier for the horse to understand”.

### **Four Winds Farm**

Next we traveled to Four Winds Farm where Michael Klimke and Suzanne Hassler rode, and Scott Hassler, retiring young horse coach, spoke. This team of instructors was refreshing to watch, as they all believe in the same principles of training, which became apparent watching them work.

While Michael and Suzanne rode, Scott spoke about the fundamentals of dressage and working with horses while relating it back to the horses working.

For him and his team, focusing on the individual horse was first and foremost, along with always striving to improve horsemanship. Scott sees himself as the horses’ coach and he strives to read the horse, find his strengths and weaknesses, and create a program that works for the individual. Building confidence and understanding with the animal, he said, is key to training, and working in highly concentrated work for short set, he believes, is one of the most effective ways to train because it keeps the horses’ bodies and minds fresh and ready to work. When riding, it is important to “listen to the horse and prepare it” for the movements ahead, he said.

Another key component Scott stressed was establishing relaxation in the horse before adding power to the work. This ensured that the horse stays happy, confident, and working without tension. And along with relaxation, he stressed a variety in work and using the horses’ highlights to improve the weaknesses, such as allowing a horse who enjoys extended trot to perform this ‘highlight’ to build confidence for a movement that may be more difficult, such as a half pass.

## **Yeguada de Ymas**

At Yeguada de Ymas, Juan Matute Sr instructed his son Juan and an additional rider as they worked with the horses. Juan Sr explained how the benefits of in-hand work to warm the horse up, rather than getting on the horse right from the start.

Both riders worked their horses in hand, schooling piaffe, passage, shoulder in and renvers to loosen the horses for the ride. It was explained that this is a great way to teach horses to carry weight behind. By using the voice, the reins, and a whip lightly on top of the croup, the riders worked with the horses to prepare them for the ride.

Juan Sr also demonstrated himself working with the horses in-hand. "I always offer my hand to the horse," he explained. He allows the horse to smell him and say hello when approaching them, and explained that he never wears sunglasses, so that he can look into the horses' eyes. "Tricks are not hard to teach, the mind is," and because of this, Juan stressed the importance of working with "no drama" to keep the horses relaxed and in tune while working.

Watching horses have this type of warm up was unique, but it was explained that not all horses benefit from stretching in the warm up as it causes some to become croup high and makes it a challenge for the horse to collect later. However not all horses we saw were warmed up in such a manner. A young 5 year old was presented and warmed up under saddle. This horse's warm up was ridden very forward, with some 2 point in the canter.

Just as the other stables had stressed the importance of variety, Juan Sr. explained that they often took the horses out of the arena and took time to hack out.

## **Roundabout Stables**

At the last stop of the day, Shelly Francis rode a lovely Grand Prix horse. She was amazing to watch because her horse was extremely in tune with her and very sensitive. The lightest touch of the leg produced a reaction, something she explained was very important for her to teach the horses.

Warming the horse up, she began in the walk for a good ten minutes, using lateral work to loosen the horse's body and get it on the aids. She would often ride half passes, taking a few strides to push the haunches over extra or change the bend to a leg yield to work on suppling the horse.

In her ride, she worked many elements of the Grand Prix test, preparing for the Nation's Cup that week. Shelly demonstrated beautiful transitions within each gait, proving the adjustability of her horse, all while maintaining relaxation and suppleness. She rode many trot-passage-trot transitions, all while testing the reactivity of the horse. As many of the riders of the day, she allowed her horse to stretch after highly collected work, and showed clear relaxation in her ride.

Thank you again to Dressage4kids for the opportunity to participate in such an inspiring event, and thank you to the Dressage Foundation for the great day! It was a phenomenal learning experience and very inspirational!