

***This week I had the pleasure of interviewing long-time D4K member Phoebe McNeely. Phoebe is a USDF Bronze medalist, aspiring to compete her self-made mare at the FEI levels in the coming years. She is also a college student hoping to begin vet school in the fall to become a mixed practice veterinarian. I hope you enjoy this interview, getting a deeper look into how Phoebe balances every aspect of her busy life, and advice that she has for anyone looking to follow in her footsteps.***

**Share a little about yourself and how you got into horses.**

My name is Phoebe McNeely. I'm a senior at Berry College. I have a double major in Animal Science and Spanish with a Chemistry minor.

I started riding when I was 6 years old (2007). One of my best friends at the time invited me to go to horse camp with her at Ellenwood Equestrian Center. I was completely hooked after that, and became a horse-crazy kid, asking my parents every other day to buy me a pony. I really enjoyed just spending time with the horses and very little aspiration of competing.

**Tell me about your current horse and how she came into your life.**

I met Marilyn when I was 12 (2013). She was a young, failed-hunter jumper, lesson pony that my trainers Lynn and Leah Marks bought to join their lesson program. Marilyn looks like the Barbie Dream Pony— Palomino paint with one blue eye and one brown. It was totally love at first sight. But, she is a total diva. She's very sensitive, and used to crow-hop when any leg aid was put on. She made a lot of people cry, but I was totally smitten.

I'm not really sure why, but something about working with Marilyn really brought out my interest in competing. Despite having ridden at a dressage barn for a while, I really didn't know how the scoring worked or what any of the levels meant. I worked really diligently and with Lynn and Leah's help, I took Marilyn to local schooling shows. I did fine, but I didn't earn any super high scores. At the time, since I didn't really understand the scoring, I wasn't really discouraged by getting lower scores than my barn mates. I loved going to shows to spend time with my friends, and grow with Marilyn.

Around that time I got introduced to Dressage4kids, which really nurtured my growing interest in dressage. I started to learn basically everything possible about dressage.

A few years went by, and I really wanted to go to recognized dressage shows and qualify for regionals. Around that time I started training primarily with Leah who supported me all the way.

As we trained Leah taught me and Marilyn more dressage movements, mainly to improve Marilyn's suppleness and throughness. As we improved I wanted to keep showing with her. When we had a leg yield and a little trot lengthening, I went up to first level. When we had a little shoulder-in put together, Leah said "what's in 2nd level 1?", we looked it up and decided "yeah Marilyn could probably do that".

We had a wonderful second level debut, and Leah and I looked at 2nd level 3 and decided again “yeah, she could probably do that”. We gave it a shot, and It went pretty well.

I was showing second level the summer before I left for college, and towards the end of the summer Leah said, “Listen, the jump between second level and third isn’t that big. Let’s just try to go for 3rd level 1”. So we added a half pass and we discovered that Marilyn has a beautiful flying lead change. Fortunately or unfortunately, the covid-19 outbreak brought me home from college early, and I spent every ounce of my freetime riding. When shows finally opened back up, I signed up for my first third level tests, and I got my Bronze medal on my first two rides.

With that out of the way, I really wanted to dip my toes into 3rd level 3. Just to see how we did. On my first attempt of the test I earned a qualifying score to go to regionals. I hadn’t planned on trying to qualify for regionals that year, but my mom, my close barn friends, and Leah really encouraged me to go for it. I went back to college when the summer ended, came home about a week later to finish qualifying for regionals. Then I had maybe 6 rides before arriving in Ocala for regional championships. Marilyn and I ended up placing 8th in the Jr/YR championship class. The awards ceremony was hilarious because it was filled with huge fancy warmbloods and then my little painted mare.

We came home, and with Leah’s help we started chipping away at 4th level movements. So far we have earned one score towards my USDF Silver medal.

Over these past 10 years together, everything that I’ve thrown at Marilyn she's said “this is hard, but I’ll do my best”. She really puts her heart into everything, and I absolutely cannot thank her enough for that.

### **What have been the biggest challenges during your journey together?**

Marilyn has a lot of things working against her. She doesn’t have the best gaits (lateral canter and short trot stride at times) and they get a little worse with tension. With that being said, she has really taught me the power of strength and conditioning. Riding her has taught me how to bring the best out of other horses that I ride. As an added bonus, on days where tension is a little more present, it allows me to take a step back and focus on emphasizing a solid foundation of the basics.

I am also really thankful to train with Leah. Leah also earned her bronze and silver medals on her horse D’artagnan, who is also a non-traditional dressage horse. Having a trainer that believes in me and supports me all the way helped me push through so many bad rides and doubts.

### **Biggest accomplishments?**

Earning my USDF Bronze Medal on a self made horse  
Finishing 8th in the 3rd level Jr/YR class at regionals

### **How has your horse and your journey together impacted your life and career? Truly,**

Dressage4kids has made the biggest impact on my career aspirations. During TEAM clinics, I had the great benefit of talking with local veterinarians, nutritionists, acupuncturists, and chiropractors. As I reflected on my journey and their stories, I realized how much I was interested in that aspect of the horse industry. The more I’ve learned during my college career has only confirmed that interest in science and medicine.

While talking with these professionals, I realized that it was totally possible to have a career with horses and keep riding (and learning). What I really hope for my future is that I can help or encourage other people like me with horses like Marilyn to keep striving for their dreams.

**What are some challenges you've faced and overcome as a young aspiring professional?** Time management and self-driven pressure. Trying to be competitive in college and maintain good grades in a rigorous degree field is a lot. I definitely have a habit of putting too much on my plate and then becoming upset when everything doesn't turn out perfectly.

I am really lucky because when I first moved to college, Leah helped me form a connection with a trainer in Rome, Georgia. Kimberly Wallace really took me under her wing and let me learn from her experience and her horses. So even though I couldn't go home very often to ride Marilyn, I was still able to ride. While I'm at school, Marilyn gets to live her best-lesson-horse-life and teach new dressage riders the ropes.

I put a lot of pressure on myself to achieve my goals (I think we all do). It can be frustrating when it takes a couple tries to achieve those goals.

**How have those challenges helped you grow as a person and rider?**

It has taken me a very long time to learn that it's okay to not do everything. Or do everything perfectly. Sometimes it can be beneficial to take a step back and remember why you love something so much.

I also have learned more and more to focus on the positive, which is really hard on some days. When we choose to focus on positivity, there are actual neurological pathways that form and help continue that trend of positivity.

**How did you balance your equestrian/school experience? Did you end up having to prioritize one over the other?**

Time management and planning become super important when balancing school (especially college) and horses. For me keeping up good grades is very important for my degree program and my vet school application process. So sometimes I would have to prioritize school to keep up my grades. What I think is also really important to note is that for many of us, the barn is our sanctuary. It's important to work hard, but it's equally important to rest (mental rest is important too!!!). Spending time with horses has provided me with a great break from school, so it absolutely needs to be prioritized as well.

**Do you think you gained anything from college that helped you grow as an equestrian?**

Definitely. When I first arrived at Berry my academic adviser sat everyone down and explained that regardless of our previous experience with animals, it's important to learn about what other animals/agriculture industries have going on. A lot of times seeing a different approach or looking at different technologies can be really applicable to your field of interest. Coming into college I never would have expected to learn so much about/from cows, but I'm really interested to see how some of the reproductive, nutritional, genetic, and technological advancements from the dairy industry might be incorporated into the horse industry for better animal care.

**What field are you looking to go into in Vet school? Any advice for someone looking to take the same path you are?**

I really want to be a mixed practice vet (meaning I work with both small and large animals). The advice I would give to someone interested in Veterinary Medicine who is involved with horses; is to really become involved with your sport. Go volunteer with your local GMOs, and participate in things that demonstrate that you really care about the horse world beyond just riding.

Balancing vet school prep and riding is another great act of time management. I am really grateful for Leah's flexibility with my crazy work schedule. It is a challenge, but it is possible.

**Tell me about how you got involved in Dressage4Kids.**

Around when I first started going to schooling shows, I heard my barn friends talking with Leah about going to an EDAP (not TEAM) clinic. They sounded so excited, and it sounded so cool. I really wanted to go, but I think the clinic was already full. Leah encouraged me to go to the Atlanta Youth Dressage Festival instead since it was running in conjunction with the clinic. I loved the Youth Festival SO much. I was totally hooked.

The next year I went to my first TEAM clinic and had a blast. I learned SO much and made a lot of new friends. I have participated in six TEAM clinics since then, and four Youth Festivals. I really hope to participate in one more youth festival before I'm too old.

**Do you think you'd be where you are today without D4K?**

Absolutely not!

**What are you most grateful for about D4K?**

Dressage4kids totally opened my world up to all the possibilities of the horse industry. I am so thankful for that.

D4K also gave me some of my best friends in the horse world. One other aspect that I love about D4K is the attitude of improvement and positivity. I love that this organization is building a place where we can learn from one another.

**Any advice for other young riders who are interested in D4K?**

1. Set reasonable goals for yourself
2. Be realistic with what is possible— you may not go to the olympics at 18, and that's okay.
3. Sometimes you need to just go for it.

4. Be kind to everyone
5. Make and maintain connections, those connections will probably help you later on in life
6. Be active outside of just riding your horse.
7. It's okay not to win every class or set a new PR every ride, work on yourself and trust the process.