

I had a wonderful time at Dressage4Kids TEAM clinic and Alanta Youth Dressage Festival with Lendon Gray. I was privileged enough to receive a D4K scholarship to attend this excellent educational opportunity. Not only did I make many new friends, but I also furthered my education. This is my third time attending this TEAM Clinic and Festival and each year I continue to walk away with a greater understanding of the fundamentals of riding.

The clinic began on Friday morning. All riders are required to watch the other riders lessons and attend all the lectures. In my experience, I feel I learn more by watching others while listening to the instruction. This is a very valuable resource that I feel more riders should take advantage of. After a day of learning, it was my turn to be placed under the watchful eye of Ms. Gray. I was riding my newly acquired D4K Donation Horse, Action Ace. I had many takeaways from that lesson about the effectiveness of aids and how to get the horse in front of your leg. Even so, something felt off. Ace has had his bout of struggles since I acquired him, all of which have been no fault of his or his previous caregivers. After a rather hard lesson and a discussion with Ms. Gray, it was decided that I would bring my other horse, Darby, to participate in the rest of the clinic and Festival on Sunday.

I was extremely devastated to once again receive a lesson in patience. I think the important aspect of these life lessons is that we must listen to our horses. They are never trying to frustrate us, get under our skin, or make us question our decisions. Instead, they are trying to communicate something. I am extremely glad I took the time to listen in Ace's case.

Friday afternoon involved a call to my wonderful veterinarian and a good friend with a similar experience. Together, we established we were going to dig deeper into why Ace felt a little off. To our surprise, we found a muscle tear in his left hind hamstring. Based on ultrasound it appears to be an old tear and likely explains many of the issues I have been dealing with.

Saturday morning rolled around bright and early. Rides began at seven. I was the last ride of the day, as my wonderful mother drove home and back three hours each way to retrieve Darby. We had a wonderful lesson working on developing his collected gaits and being straighter in our changes. The overall theme was to quit holding his hand, he is a trained horse now. That is both a wonderful and truthful comment to receive.

To work on this theme, we did lots of transitions within the gaits. On a twenty-meter circle, we would push him forward and then bring him back to a developing pirouette canter. This gave me a nice feeling of the level of collection my horse is beginning to develop. We then touched on the half-pass, working to have the shoulders start and have the haunches follow suit, not vice versa. To achieve this, we worked with the idea of riding onto a diagonal and then bringing the haunches onto the line, keeping the shoulders centered to a point on the end of the diagonal line. The saying has always been "a half pass is merely haunches in on the diagonal" but now was the time to really put the idea into practice. Overall, it was a lesson full of learning for myself and my horse.

Sunday was the Festival, beginning at eight. We began with our written test, where I was given a test of fifty multiple-choice questions on the books for my age group. Of those questions, multiple were on ring etiquette and horse show rules. After my written test was my dressage test. I chose to ride the FEI Junior Team Test. This test was very new to me, though it is widely respected as a 3rd/4th level equivalent. Darby was exceptional, having one of our most rideable tests to date.

After our dressage test, we had our equation round where we were judged on how well we sit and remain balanced in the saddle. I placed second out of my age group and was very happy considering the other riders' competency.

I was on a scramble team. I really enjoyed the team aspect and making friends with my other teammates. We ended up first as a team. I was second overall, placing first in my written test, first in my dressage test, and second in my equation. After a whirlwind of a weekend, I now have a plan in place to rehab Ace's muscle tear and Darby continues to prove he is the little Perchron that could. I was extremely happy with both of my horses and the knowledge we gained. I look forward to attending future TEAM clinics and the Dressage4Kids Winter Intensive Training program this winter in Wellington, FL.