

Shadow Coaching for Para-Dressage

Training 4 Teaching—Scholarship Report

Submitted by: Jennifer Beyer

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With support from the Dressage4Kids “Training4Teaching” scholarship, I was able to work collaboratively with 3 different dressage trainers to improve my technical coaching skills through “shadow coaching” sessions. In shadow coaching, one coach leads the session, while the other provides feedback on the leading coach’s performance. Collaboration is invaluable in my work with para-equestrians. Working with riders with disabilities is a unique challenge—one that requires a creative approach, and a robust team of support. Through the shadow coaching sessions, I learned how I can improve as a coach, as well as specific instruction techniques to support my students. I also added 3 FEI trainers to my local para-equestrian support network.

A variety of scheduling and other challenges forced me to select two different trainers than I originally outlined in my scholarship proposal. Fortunately the dressage community in Michigan is strong, and I was able to engage 3 FEI trainers—Vanessa Voltman, Roz Kinstler and Maryal Barnett—in my shadow coaching sessions. With the exception of Roz Kinstler (who coached a para-dressage athlete at the 2012 London Paralympics), the trainers had not coached riders with disabilities before, so it was a valuable learning experience for them as well! Four riders participated in each session, ranging from Grade I to Grade IV. Some have plans to compete at local shows, while others are just beginning their para-dressage adventures.



The Big Picture—Improving as a Coach

1

Para-dressage is dressage! Use the Pyramid of Training. Seemingly obvious, this theme was strong in all 3 shadow coaching sessions. Many of the athletes I coach began riding with me in our therapeutic/adaptive riding program, and have transitioned into sport. My job (now) as their para-dressage coach is to work with them as athletes pursuing their sport of choice. The visiting trainers approached each rider in the same way they would able-bodied equestrians— *excellent* examples of how I should continue to coach my riders. This experience allowed me to see that many of my students were ready and able to take on more responsibility for the quality of their riding. It is my role to teach them how to correctly train their horses through the dressage pyramid.

2

Para-dressage tests are technical and difficult, no matter the grade level. It is easy to think of lower-grade para-dressage tests—which are walk/trot—as similar to able-bodied USDF introductory tests. When we collaborated with visiting trainers on tests or portions of tests, they all recognized how technical (and difficult) para-dressage tests are. I need to help my riders become better test riders as they move toward their competitive goals—this means schooling tests more often and with a sharper eye on accuracy.

3

An outside perspective can give riders a boost. Coming into each session, the participating riders were a mix of excited & nervous. Each visiting trainer truly treated the participating riders as *equestrians*. So often people with disabilities don't see themselves as "athletes," and it was amazing to watch the burst of confidence that stemmed from this respect. Instead of focusing on what the riders *could not do*, each visiting trainer placed emphasis squarely on what the riders *could do*. This led to success, confidence, and a feeling of being able to take the "next steps" in their riding. Inviting outside perspectives will be crucial as I continue to coach para-equestrians. Continued feedback on my performance and my students' performance will help us all improve.

The Details—Coaching Tips That Clicked

Each visiting trainer had a unique approach, but all clearly emphasized *correct basics*. With such a diverse set of riders we covered a lot of territory in each session:

June 21, 2021—Vanessa Voltman



Vanessa emphasized accuracy in schooling and having a clear understanding (at every moment) of where the horse should be going and what the horse should be doing. "You don't want him/her to come up with their own ideas!" was a phrase she used often to help riders understand that THEY needed to be in charge of the horse's movement.

She helped riders understand accuracy by encouraging them to "look through your horse's ears," while considering where the front & back of the horse will land at any given letter. "There is a lot of horse behind you," is a phrase she would use to remind them to continue riding the movement as they came up to and passed the letter.

Vanessa also encouraged us to use transitions in and out of the trot (even for Grade I riders who may not be able to trot more than a few steps) to energize the walk.

October 25, 2021—Roz Kinstler

Roz was very adept at using various schooling exercises to get results. Riding on the second track was particularly helpful as it helped all riders feel whether or not their horse was straight or “wandering” toward the inside or outside of the school. She also used transitions to remind riders that “go is go” and “whoa is whoa,” and that those aids need to be clear to the horse. Roz emphasized that riders should expect MORE from their horse with a light aid, and to not get into the “trap” of asking for something with increased force.



For riders who tended to shift to the outside of turns, she asked them to “look over your horse’s outside ear” as a trick to help properly balance over the inside seat bone. She also asked riders with one-sided weaknesses to hold the end of the stirrup leather on their weaker side and “pull on it” to help stay centered.

Roz left each participating rider with a menu of exercises we can return to in future schooling sessions. She encouraged riders to set short and long-term goals, and reminded them that goals *do not* always have to be related to showing.

November 7, 2021—Maryal Barnett



Maryal used a variety of visualization techniques to help riders use their whole body to influence the horse. “Move your guts over” was a phrase she used frequently to help riders engage their oblique muscles when asking a horse to yield to the inside leg.

Maryal used leg-yielding as an exercise to help riders “be responsible for both sides of their horse,” and she emphasized that the “thought of a leg yield” can be used to ride deeper into corners and to add more bend to circles.

In test riding, Maryal encouraged riders to think about symmetry and make movements the same on both the right and left sides. This was particularly helpful for some of the technical movements in the Grade I tests. Maryal also worked with riders to be clear on what movement they were performing—to finish one movement clearly before beginning the next (even when the test asks for movements to end and begin at the same letter).

Thank You!

I would like to sincerely thank Dressage4Kids and all sponsoring partners for this opportunity. I learned something new from each visiting trainer, and my para-equestrians were excited & energized with each session. We have goals to work toward and new friends to help us along the way! I would also like to thank all of the visiting instructors for making time in their busy schedules to make each session a success:

Vanessa Voltman— Vanessa is a licensed instructor and trainer in dressage with the Royal Dutch Equestrian Federation. She worked with many exceptional dressage trainers such as: Piet Oothout, Johan Hamminga, Ger Geertsen and Rien van der Schaft focusing on traditional Dutch and German methods of Dressage. Vanessa competed several FEI level horses, and created a successful business of buying and selling young dressage prospects. She is currently based in South Lyon, Michigan.

Roz Kinstler— Roz Kinstler is an experienced FEI competitor and instructor/trainer with over 30 years of experience. She has coached several students from novices to competent riders on NAJYRC teams. She was coach to a member of the 2012 US Paralympic Dressage Team in London. Roz has students that have competed successfully at the Arabian Sporthorse Nationals through Grand Prix. She is currently based in Whitmore Lake, Michigan.

Maryal Barnett— Maryal is a retired FEI “C” Dressage Judge, and an active US Equestrian “S” Dressage Judge and Canadian Equestrian Federation Senior Dressage Judge. She is an Instructor and Examiner for the US Equestrian Dressage Judges Training Program, and she is on the USDF “L” Faculty to teach future dressage judges. During her competitive years, Maryal showed her own horses from training level through Grand Prix and earned many USDF awards. She is currently based in Holt, Michigan.



The scholarship recipient, Jennifer Beyer, is a PATH Certified Therapeutic Riding Instructor and a USEF Recognized Para-Dressage Coach. She teaches at Therapeutic Riding, Inc. in Ann Arbor, Michigan—a USEF/USPEA Para-Equestrian Dressage Center of Excellence.