

## Dressage4Kids Scholarship Write-up – Wellington 2019

I got the chance to spend the winter in Wellington, FL working and training with some client horses as well as my own 2 personal horses. My education was greatly enhanced due to the generous scholarship I received from Dressage4Kids to work with my trainers Olivia Lagoy-Weltz, Betsy Steiner and Sarah Travis. I got to take lessons on 6 different horses over the course of the winter and I learned so much from my lessons. I am going to go through the 6 horses and talk about some of the things that I worked on with each horse and how the trainers recommended working with the horses:

### **Oz**

Oz is one of my personal horses. He is a 9-year-old Oldenburg gelding who I have had since he was 5. He has been quite a challenge for me. He is a very sweet horse but has been slow to mature and doesn't always like it when I give too much input on what he should do. I rode him in a clinic with Olivia 2 years ago and she understood him right away and gave me a couple of key ideas that I use with him every day. Because of that, I was really excited to get to ride him with her. When he was a bit younger and acted out more, he could really jump around. However, when I would get too tight with my reins he would feel claustrophobic and would get even more upset. Olivia would have me keep him very bent to the inside and send him super forward, so I had some control and he couldn't stop or leap around. However, she would have me keep the outside rein completely loose so that he didn't feel trapped. He would fall through his outside shoulder during this, but that was totally fine. It allowed me to ride him through a situation where he was upset and help him – whereas in the past it often felt like I just had to wait it out and that didn't help me or him. Eventually, he would get in a rhythm and forget about whatever was making him upset and then we would slowly straighten him out and return him to normal work.

This season, we mostly worked on getting Oz to carry himself and put himself together more. He had done training and first level and that was relatively easy for him. However, as he has moved into the second and third level work, he has to compress his body more. I have had trouble doing that and keeping the relaxation, as he had a tendency to get upset about feeling trapped in that more compressed state. Olivia gave me a lot of different things to do to work on that. First, she made sure that he was completely in front of my leg. Sometimes when he felt trapped he would want to back off, but that was the worst situation. We would do quick transitions from walk to trot and back or from trot to canter and back. If I could keep him thinking forward and active, then he could settle into the different feeling. She had me set my reins at the length they needed to be and then treat them like side reins instead of negotiating with him about it as much. We used a lot of counter canter and transitions within the gait to get his hind legs underneath him. The whole time, Olivia talked about thinking about having his haunches lower and his withers lift, because when he did that, his neck would compress as a result of that change in the rest of his body. Working with Olivia reminded me to not make things too complicated. If you stick with the basic principles, you will almost always get the best solution to the problem.

I also rode Oz with Betsy Steiner at one of the horse shows. Oz hasn't had much experience showing, so he can get rambunctious at the show grounds. Betsy was able to help me get him very loose and swinging over his back, so that my aids could come through more. When he gets tense, he has a tendency to block me out. When he does this, there is nothing I can do to help him and whenever I put my leg on he overreacts. Betsy had me do a lot of shoulder in, haunches in and lateral work to keep him moving in his lower back and practice him accepting my leg aids. We also worked on transitions within the gait and turns of the forehand/haunches, all to allow him to feel my aids and practice responding positively to them.

### **Stedemann**

Stedemann is my other personal horse. He is owned by D4K and was generously donated by Sue Davis. He is a 15-year-old Oldenburg gelding. Stedemann has had some soundness problems, so for the first 3 months of the season I was riding him by myself. He was getting fit again after a period of stall rest last year. However, during that time we were able to finally find a maintenance regimen that works for him and he started to get stronger. I got to take a couple of lessons with Olivia on him before doing our first PSG at Global Week 11. Olivia gave me a lot of helpful ideas for how to ride movements that were harder for Stedemann and how to set up the test. One thing that she talked about that was very helpful was how to ride the corner before the half pass zig zag in the PSG. The left half pass (which is the direction that is harder for Stedemann to begin with) is first in that zig zag. On top of that, it is right after the walk, so he is sometimes a bit behind my leg. She had me take the canter and then immediately send him a bit forward. Then, coming into the corner, I would collect him and ask for haunches in through the corner. Then, turn onto your line staying in the haunches in, but making sure you bring the shoulders around first, so when you go into your half pass the horse's shoulders aren't leading. That worked very well for Stedemann. It helped me get his hind legs underneath him and keep him active even though we had just walked.

We also worked a lot of my position when I rode Stedemann. I have a tendency to turn my toes out when I am riding and move too much in my upper body, especially in the sitting trot. Olivia showed me the position I needed to have my hip in to allow my foot to lay flat against Stedemann's side and had me ride without stirrups to try to find a way to move with his back, instead of bouncing more than he was. It is so helpful to have someone really help me with my position, as unsurprisingly, it made a huge difference in how Stedemann went and it helped on the other horses as well. I have some homework to do there!

### **Wee**

Wee was a client horse who belongs to Hatfield Sporthorse International. He is an 11-year-old Andalusian gelding. Wee is a very fun horse. He is smart and athletic. The main thing I worked on with him was his flying changes. He does all of the I1 with the exception of the flying changes. He does them, but in the past, they were often a half stride late and he would over emphasize the flying part of the change. However, by the end of the season after working on the changes with Olivia and Sarah they were clean about 90% of the time and he had even

started some tempi changes. Sarah and Olivia both really focused on the quality of the canter. Wee has a very good canter, but it is so comfortable that I would sometimes let it get a little bit flat. We worked on keeping him really active behind and making sure he had enough airtime in his stride to take a full stride with his hind leg in the change. In the beginning, they would be quite expressive and jolting. However, we focused on keeping the quality of the change in his hind legs, and the smoothness of the change got better and better. I have learned that it is often best not to over worry about when horses want to jump a bit too much or do too much learning their changes. As long as they are doing the correct thing, as they become more comfortable, most of those problems fix themselves.

My favorite exercise I worked on with Olivia for his changes started with riding the counter canter on a 20-meter circle. For this example, I will say I was on the right lead, circling to the left. Olivia would have me do a haunches-in left in right lead canter. This in and of itself often made Wee want to change, because it is essentially the change aid, but I keep at it until I was able to move his body in that way without him changing. Then, I would half halt on the outside rein and give slightly with the left rein to allow the left hind leg space to come through and ask for the change. He almost always changed clean when we worked on them this way. Moving the right lead canter into the haunches in left moved his left hind leg closer to his center of gravity and more underneath his body, making it easier for him to change clean.

My favorite exercise I worked on with Sarah was relatively simple. I would go down the quarter line on the left lead and leg yield off my right leg. After doing that for a couple of steps I would walk, canter right and then immediately leg yield a couple steps off my right leg. Then I would walk again, take the left lead canter and start the process over. I would do that exercise over and over until I could get the simple change without having to do anything with my hands and have him stay soft and loose over his back the whole time. That exercise showed him how to stay loose and quick at the same time. Once I had all those ingredients, instead of asking for the simple change I would ask for a flying change. That exercise was also very successful and by the end of the season, he always got the changes when they were in that exercise.

## **Sunshine**

Sunshine was a client horse who belongs to Hatfield Sporthorse International. Sunshine is a 10-year-old Oldenburg gelding. He is a very athletic and sweet horse. However, he had moved a lot in the past year and been in multiple different programs, so I decided to step back to the basics and just simplify things for him as we were getting to know each other. One of the main things that we did with Sunshine was a lot of lunging. I brought him to Betsy Steiner's and she showed me how to long line him. That was incredibly helpful for him. He didn't want to take the contact and, due to the natural passage tendency in his trot, would hold his back a little bit to create more bounce. I just wanted him to do a boring trot with his back moving and reach into the contact. The long lining was a great way to explain that to him. Betsy could use the same aids and ideas, but it came at the problem through a back door and offered a different explanation for him.

I have even more appreciation for long lining and other forms of explaining things to horses after this season. What would have taken me 2 hours riding, Betsy could do in 30 minutes on the long line. I'm sure Betsy could have done it much faster riding too! But for me, it was really helpful to be exposed to more ways of introducing things to horses. The more tools you have in your tool box, the better. Then you can be prepared for the many different types of horses you will encounter over time.

## **Obi and Leo**

Obi and Leo were both client horses who belong to Hatfield Sporthorse international. Obi is a 6-year-old German riding pony and Leo is a 5-year-old warmblood. I didn't have many lessons on Obi or Leo, as they were both showing first level and schooling second level. I could only take so many lessons, so I focused on the upper level horses. However, I had a lesson with Olivia on each of them and she gave me some helpful pointers for young horses.

Obi is very athletic, and the flying changes were very natural for him. He would do them all the time on the lunge line and in the field. When I tried to work on counter canter, he would also throw in flying changes. I didn't want to correct him for those, because it was a reasonable response and I never want to discourage a horse from doing changes. But the changes were often a half stride late behind as he wasn't strong enough yet and so I didn't want him to practice that. Also, he did eventually have to learn to counter canter. Olivia would have me canter down the long side and at B or E do a half ten-meter circle and head back to the track, like at the beginning of first level test 1 but in canter. Then I would hold the counter canter through the short side and then immediately go back across the diagonal to true canter. Because he only had to hold the counter canter for a short period of time, that made the exercise doable for him. Also, the 10-meter circle helped me find a very balanced canter, which made maintaining the lead easier in the counter canter.

Sarah talks a lot about thinking about what the underlying reasons you are having a problem are. With Obi, she talked about how it was important for him to become looser through his back and push more into the connection. As that improved, the counter canter would improve with it and the changes would be clean when it came time to train those.

I am so lucky to have been able to have the experience I did in Florida this year. I learned a lot, both with my riding and how to respond to different situations in my professional life. I am incredibly grateful to D4K for helping make this training possible for me. I learned so much and feel very lucky to have been able to take lessons with such high-quality trainers.