

USDF Instructor/Trainer Program

While in Florida, and through the generous scholarship of Dressage 4 Kids, I participated in the USDF Instructor/Trainer Educational Workshops this past winter season (2020) in Wellington, FL. It was an amazing experience and the knowledge available during the three different workshops was priceless. I am incredibly thankful to USDF for providing such educational opportunities and promoting dressage education in the United States. The main goal of these workshops was to create a program in the United States that brings up knowledgeable classical dressage trainers, and for those trainers to then go out and produce correct riding programs. The three workshops required were riding, lungeing, and teaching. Each workshop was completed over a two-day period and focused on the three aspects of what was required for the certification exam.

The first workshop was the riding workshop instructed by Bill McMullin at Hampton Green Farm. We started by attending a morning lecture focused on breaking down the fundamentals of the Training Pyramid (the six steps and how they interconnect and work together), the paces of the horse and the footfalls of each gait, common faults, and the assessment cycle of training the horse. The assessment cycle was the focus of the workshop and consisted of 4 phases: Observe, Analyze, Plan, and Implement. This cycle was also important in the following two workshops as well. When riding, we should have a plan for how we want our ride to go and by using this cycle it better helped to formulate a cohesive plan of action for the ride that focused on what you wanted your end goal to be. The group consisted of very good riders, however, we all really enjoyed having the structure of the assessment cycle to base our riding plans from. After the lecture, we went back and each of us rode our horses putting our assessment plan into action. We each had a warm-up phase (Observe), then we would talk about how our warm-up went (Analyze), discuss what exercises we wanted to do to accomplish our goal (Plan), and then we would enter our work phase (Implement). At the end of our ride we would always come back and discuss what we

liked, what worked, what did not work, and what we would do differently for next time. For me, my focus after my warm up was to supple my horse a little more honestly over and through his back. The exercise that I chose to implement and work with was leg yields. We did stair stepping leg yields and leg yields with transitions. To help with this I started my horse just moving off my leg with a head to wall leg yield and turn on the forehand. After implementing and working through the exercises, my horse started to more naturally step underneath himself and moved quicker off my leg. On the second day, we all rode an unfamiliar horse and used the same assessment cycle to work with this horse. The unfamiliar horse that I rode was very tricky with his suppleness and his rhythm, so I decided to work with quick transitions to help him find his hind leg. After implementing my exercise, I decided to change tactics because the horse was getting a bit uptight and stiff through his back which was the opposite of my goal. What we ended up working on was turn on the forehand into transitions to help keep the horse supple and through his back. I really loved this cycle because it gives such a clear plan of action and does not let you wander during your ride. For me, I felt that that was the biggest help and it helped direct my ride towards my goal. It also makes you address one problem at a time rather than trying to fix everything at once. I thought that this was a highly productive workshop that helped to highlight some of my weak points in my riding and training to create a better overall approach for my horses and students.

The second workshop was the lungeing workshop led by Sarah Martin at Laura Ashley's Farm in Loxahatchee. The workshop was conducted in a similar way to the first, and we had a lecture session in the morning on the basics of lungeing and how to assess what the horse needs to work on to develop their overall musculature and help improve their balance. Laura Ashley very kindly provided the horses and snacks for each of the participants over the two days. After the lecture, we all went to meet our horses and prep them for our turn to lunge. During the lungeing session, we were asked to utilize the assessment cycle (from the first workshop) for the horses that we lunged. My first lungeing session went decently. I

struggled with the ability to pinpoint one thing that would affect the whole picture and instead was trying to work on the end goal without taking the first step. During my session, Sarah kept talking with me and asking me why I was doing what I was doing. At the end, my overall concept and what I saw was sound, but I struggled with the approach on how to achieve the goal. Sarah gave us all good feedback and focused on the concepts and basics of lungeing and what to look for. On the second day, we were given a different horse to lunge, but this time we also had to teach a seat/position lesson to one of Laura Ashley's students or one of the participants. Seat lessons were a bit challenging since you had to focus on an assessment plan for both the horse and the rider. During this lungeing session I had a rider that was fairly tight in the hips, so we did a ton of hip flexor work and getting her to loosen up and move more with the horse in a natural way that was comfortable. The main focus that we worked on was improving her core stability and allowing her hips to really swing with the horse with some no stirrups and no reins work. I found the seat lesson to be highly challenging as you had to lunge the horse correctly and set the rider up for success, but also you had to be cognizant of the rider and their problems too. Coming away from the workshop, I learned that lungeing can be useful in more ways than just trying to burn off energy or help to supple a horse. It is a highly important training tool that should be taught more frequently to riders and instructors. I also loved how the seat/position lesson really highlighted where a rider was the weakest and you could isolate that problem area and have exercises designed to help improve that part. I think that it is important for riders to be aware of their body position and balance in the saddle, but I also think that it is highly beneficial for the instructor to also be able to pinpoint position and balance problems for a rider on the horse.

The third workshop was the teaching workshop with Lilo Fore at White Fences. In true workshop fashion, we had a lecture in the morning on the fundamentals of teaching a lesson with the use of our handy assessment cycle. After the lecture, we were given a volunteer horse/rider pair to teach. My first lesson was a bit undirected as I was highly intimidated

since I knew that rider had taken this horse up to Grand Prix on her own. After teaching the lesson, Lilo gave me great feedback and just told me to follow the assessment cycle to a T, and reminded me that every horse and rider needs improvement. In this case, it was the suppleness of the horse and its adjustability. Lilo made this difficult workshop very inspiring. She shared many stories with us and was very supportive the entirety of the workshop. A big take home message that Lilo gave was you need to “See it, vocalize it, have the rider improve and have something to take away from the lesson.” What this meant was you need to be able to explain to your student why you are having them do an exercise so that they can learn when to apply that exercise in the future and what the exercise’s benefit will be. The second lesson that I taught, I put all of this into action. It was a well put together, focused lesson, with direction, and talking with the rider the entire time. One of my favorite things is feedback from the rider. I like to know how they learn and then utilize different teaching methods to help access a deeper understanding for the rider. One example of this was having my rider visualize holding a tissue box between her hands to help stabilize her hands where they needed to be. This helped the rider to have a steadier connection and to also engage from her core. At the end of the workshop, Lilo emphasized the difference between teaching and coaching. When teaching, you want the student to be able to walk away from the lesson having learned something, whereas coaching is just giving feedback on what the rider is doing right then.

I felt that these workshops prepared me for the exam, but they also helped me to realize where my weaknesses as an instructor are and how I can improve myself to help my riders more. I came away from these workshops very inspired and felt that my teaching had direction and purpose. I also found that it was much easier to convey the message that I wanted to my students by following the assessment cycle and being able to verbalize to them what I see, what exercise will help, and why I chose that exercise. To help myself continue to improve, I have also been clinicing a bit more to have access to different styles of teaching and to learn different exercises and tools that I can add to my teaching

toolbox. I am excited to continue my learning in this program and to take my certification later this year, and I would highly recommend these workshops to anyone interested in becoming a trainer and/or taking the exam. The information learned from the workshops is also valuable for anyone who wants to learn to ride, teach, and train classical dressage.