

Life Through a Horse's Ears

The shrill sound of the alarm rang out, and the red numbers on the clock read 5:30a.m.; it was Sunday, the last day at Dressage for Kids. It was a bright sunny morning, and it was time to get up. Within ten minutes all the riders were up and getting dressed for the morning. Those who had early ride times were pulling on white full-seat breeches, the red team shirts, tall leather boots, and tying their hair back into neat buns before pulling on hairnets. The others were slipping into sweatpants and muck boots, preparing for a long morning of helping tack up horses and clean stalls. As each piece of show attire was donned the nervousness built, and when the hairnet was clipped neatly over my bun the butterflies in my stomach went wild. As the clock on the dashboard read 6:00a.m., the hotel grew smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror, and with each mile closer to the barn the butterflies seemed to multiply. Pulling in the driveway the familiar sounds of a morning at the barn began to soothe my nerves. There were over 200 horses spread through six huge metal barns. From each barn you could hear the grain being poured, the impatient whinnies, and the pawing of hooves against the concrete floor. When the doors to the fifth barn opened, the butterflies seemed to disappear with every step closer to the brown ears and white nose I knew so well. When she nickered to me and her hot breath tickled my neck, the butterflies were gone.

It was the most important day of the weekend, the day of the recognized tests. At 2:30p.m., the last training level 3 test was going to be ridden; that test was mine. Until 1:30 when I had to begin tacking up, the day was spent racing back and forth helping the other members of the White Spruce Farms Youth Dressage Team. Combed, brushed, and gleaming with the help of a little show sheen, Flicka was ready to be tacked up; the clock read 1:40p.m. The air smelled

of bit wipes, boot wipes, show sheen, bug spray and saddle soap. The feel of the recently-cleaned reins put me into horse show mode as we headed over to the mounting block. Smoothing the white pad, pulling on my leather gloves, and gathering my reins, I settled into a place I knew better than home. The worn spot on the knee rolls let me know that the stirrups were the right length when my knee covered it perfectly. Giving Flicka a scratch on the white spot on her withers and a slight squeeze from my legs, we made our way towards ring six, the warm-up ring.

When the clock read 2:20p.m., the sky had turned to a somber gray. 2:25p.m., the announcer called out, “Jessica Maki, age 16, riding Flicka age 7, test T3, to ring three.” The butterflies had come flying right back into my stomach, but as my instructor led us over to the ring she sent them flying right back out again. She said, “Mental toughness is the key to being a good rider. You’ve worked for this. Now you can’t control what Flicka might do, but you know how to fix it and ride a good test. Go rock this test Girl!” Slapping my knee, she sent us off.

First time around the outside of the ring, walk by and give a smile to the judge. Second time, pick up a trot, third time... the shrill sound of the whistle rang out across the ring, then the quiet. Hoof beats and heart beats set the rhythm in my head as I made the turn down centerline. At X halt, the judge stand was straight through Flicka’s ears. Saluting, I could see both hooves evenly below me; we were square. The adrenaline pumped through my veins, and the day began to move in slow motion. Proceed working trot, at C track left. We were in sync, each piece of the test going exactly like it should. Each letter was straight between Flicka’s ears, showing me that we were exactly where we should be. Approaching A, bend through the corner, outside leg back, half halt, and a squeeze from the inside leg. Looking down as we headed towards B, I willed her to be on the right lead. The leg with the white hoof was leading, showing me that was her inside leg, and we had done it. The rest of the test went like clockwork. Down centerline, halt and

salute; the only sound was my heartbeat and the whistling of the wind. Then the crowd in the bleachers erupted into applause. Smiling and patting Flicka we made our way back to barn five.

As I un-tacked Flicka showering her in kisses and treats scenarios of the award ceremony played in my head. Based on my previous scores from the tests I had ridden earlier in the weekend I knew I should get at least a 63%. Maybe we would get a ribbon, or a trophy, maybe a prize. I knew this was the best test we had ridden all year and I was proud.

Later in the day my dressage team and I took the golf cart to go and check the posted scores. Scanning down the list the scores of other members from my barn stood out to me. I scanned through the list of names until I saw mine, Jessica 53%. I did a double take, and then another one. How was my score so low if the test had gone so well? Then the judges name stood out, Courtney Kingdye, she was an Olympic level rider. No wonder it was so low, she was used to watching professionals. This is the thought that brought back my confidence from the weekend, 53% on an Olympic level was not too bad for a small town girl on a small town horse riding against people from across the world. I knew it was our best test of the year, and I was proud.