

A Lifetime in Three Months: My Time as a 2024 WIT Participant

As my time at Lendon Gray's 2024 Winter Intensive Training program comes to a close, it's filled with gratitude, joy, and a bit of sadness. Just a few short months ago I embarked on a journey of a lifetime.

I was so grateful to be accepted to the 2024 WIT program in July. Little did I know how truly life-changing the experience was going to be. Being my third season in Wellington, I was extremely excited to experience it with a group of like-minded youth. This was my first year with a car, which was an incredibly valuable asset and gave me the freedom to experience all elements of Wellington and the surrounding area.

The program began on January 3rd at the gorgeous Top Meadow Farm in Wellington. A facility that could not be more perfectly set up for our needs. It had a beautiful covered arena, an outdoor, access to hacking, a walker, a gorgeous barn, and paddocks. It truly was the best place to hold this prestigious program.

What began with awkward interactions, was slowly followed by laughter, fist bumps, and lifetime friendships. Our days began at 7am Tuesday through Sunday. Every day we would care for our horses in the morning, consisting of stalls, turnout, waters, and tending to their everyday needs. After chores, lessons began. Days varied with private lessons, semi-private, or group lessons. Lendon Gray was the primary instructor, but we also had guest instructors such as Courtney King-Dye, Beth Baumert, Liz Austin, Amanda Perkowski, and many others.

While lessons were in progress, we were able to ask questions, and take notes. In the afternoons, we would have fitness and lectures where we learned from top experts in their respective fields of nutrition, sports psychology, fitness, veterinary care, etc. We also had field trips to international riders farms or facilities. We visited everyone from Ali Brock and Endel Ots, to young horse trainers such as Hannah Irons. Each had new insights about their particular program. We would also have knowledge tests and skills to complete such as locating and naming muscles, tendons, and ligaments or how to mount properly from the ground. When we returned to the farm, we had evening chores and then split night checks among all the participants.

One of my most memorable moments was attending the USDF Trainers Conference. It was a great place to reconnect with old friends and make new connections. It was a great reminder of so many fundamental principles of training before the coming months. Sven Rothenberger and Sabine Schut-Kery had many insightful pieces with horses of varying levels.

Some of my major takeaways from the conference:

- Remind him, but don't do the job for him (Sabine)
- Challenge a subject, don't drill it (Sabine)
- Straightness does not mean going on straight lines (Sabine)
- Have 10 minutes amazing than 30 of average (Sabine)

- Ride with fantasy (Sven)
- Don't Jump into the problem if you don't have the basics (Sven)

Our lectures ranged from bit fitting and shipping, to how to care for your horse in FL. The connections gained and resources we now have access to are invaluable and one of the key pieces of the program. One of my favorites was Collier Wimmer with Three Wishes Freestyles. She has created some of my favorite freestyles to watch and it was super insightful to hear the process behind each "story". What made it even better was that she came at the program's end and helped us find music to match our horses gaits and rhythm. With her expertise, Darby and I will have a great freestyle one day, just wait!

Another requirement of the program was to conduct an interview and present a lecture. I chose to interview Besty Julino and got wonderful insights about being an owner of high-performance horses, such as what she looks for in a horse and how she picks each horse for its intended rider. I did my lecture on personality types and how they affect the way we learn. Everyone gained valuable insight into how they learn and what to look for in a trainer. It helped to explain why certain trainers fit with certain personalities!

Fridays were always a hack day or a day off for your horse. Some of my favorite Fridays were hacking along the canals, or our little jumping sessions. Fridays also consisted of venturing to the show to watch schooling as well as the CDIs. On Friday evening we would go and watch Friday Night Freestyles under the lights. It was always a joy to see the top of the sport, especially with it being an Olympic year.

As Mondays are typically a day off in the horse world, we split morning and afternoon chores to be able to get away from the farm. Mondays we would find things to experience in the heart of Wellington. This ranged from ice skating, go-karts, escape rooms, swimming, and everything in between. I was regularly more exhausted on Mondays from all the fun we had.

Most of my evenings were packed with school as I was also responsible for finishing my high school requirements that consisted of five college online classes. When I was not doing school I was gaining more knowledge when there were opportunities. I thoroughly enjoyed the Training 4 Teaching programs, Show Chic Shop Talks, and WIT parties, such as the 25th anniversary celebrating Dressage4 Kids.

Throughout the program, we would have the opportunity to show off our skills. We would have schooling shows and many of us participated in recognized shows. One of my favorites was attending the Florida Youth Dressage Championship in Ocala. We traveled up with four horses and had a weekend full of ice cream, learning, and a whole lot of karaoke. Darby and I also walked away with a qualifying score for USDF regionals and a score toward our silver medal. It was a great way to end the season and see all our hard work pay off.

Overall, WIT was nothing short of amazing and an experience I will never forget. I have made connections to people in other countries, friends to last a lifetime, and grown so much as a rider and a person. I want to thank everyone who helped this program run smoothly. Lendon Gray and Dressage4Kids are some of the greatest attributes of the dressage youth in America. My parents are also to thank for their support throughout WIT and my entire riding career. I also want to thank our amazing WIT barn manager for keeping all of us in line and the barn running smoothly. Carmen Miguliz and Top Meadow Farm, thank you for allowing us to spend the winter at your amazing facility. Lastly, the 2024 WITees deserve the biggest thank you for being an amazing group of people to spend winter in Wellington with.

WIT would not have been possible for me without Dressage4Kids and The Dressage Foundation. Did you know D4K and TDF provides scholarships to help youth under twenty-five achieve their dreams? I was privileged enough to receive the D4K Christian Kennedy Fund to help with my attendance at WIT as well as The Dressage Foundations Cynthia Apsen Fund. Please consider donating to these organizations to help support the future of our sport.

I would also like to thank those that supported me within my community. If you are ever in Tryon, NC, check out The Hay Rack for all your feed and animal needs. Elite Equine can help you put together the most beautiful riding attire as well as out fit your horses with a beautiful double bridle. Foothills Riding Club deserves a huge thank you for providing the much needed schooling shows and educational opportunities, and Tim Edwards Landscaping for all your hardware and animal needs.