

Kristi Wysocki USDF New Test Symposium

I was graciously presented with a scholarship to attend the USDF New Test Symposium with Kristi Wysocki at HIPICO Santa Fe as a 1st level demonstration rider, and I learned so much from Kristi's knowledge, expertise, and creative analogies. The entire weekend was so much fun, and such an incredible opportunity and experience.

Day one: Confidence is key

The first day of the symposium was focused on the demonstration and development of the new 2023 Training level through Developing Prix St. Georges dressage tests. Kristi gave the audience insight into what judges look for at each level, always referring to the purpose of the level, which is listed on every single test sheet. While performing our first test, 1st level test 2, I was quite nervous, but nevertheless we had a solid ride that Kristi scored in the mid 60s. After we finished our final centerline and halt, Kristi addressed the audience, asking whether my rider position score would be different or the same as my rider effectiveness score, and why. After several audience members chimed in with their opinions, Kristi clarified, stating that my rider position score would have been slightly lower, due to the fact that I was looking down the entire time! She called this "riding with a bowling ball on the horse" and advised me to open my upper body, lift my chin and eyes, and push my belly button/belt buckle forward, as it is simply impossible to look down when doing this.

Kristi, an avid eventer herself when she was younger, had heard from the president of the Dressage Club of New Mexico that I had won the Junior Beginner Novice division at the 2022 American Eventing Championships, and asked me to tell the audience about this. I shyly and quietly told them that we had won our division, but Kristi made me continue to say what we had done over and over again. At first, I was confused, until she began saying, "I don't care what you say, I care *how* you say it." It wasn't until I declared it loudly and confidently that she allowed me to stop repeating our title. Addressing both me and the auditors, Kristi began talking about how so many riders put themselves down and don't

really celebrate their victories. She tied it in perfectly with her last point about how I looked down; doing so causes me to curl up the rest of my body and to consequently, when I am nervous, revert to riding in a timid, reserved manner – the same manner in which I talk about my accomplishments in front of others. Kristi had me hop off, walk to the mirror, and high-5 myself until my self-doubt disappeared and I really put some feeling and confidence into it (my homework is to do this 5 times every day before I get on). After I mounted again, she encouraged me to be bold and go for it in my next ride; telling me to always remember that when riding a test, at a show, clinic, symposium, or whatever, it is *your* 6 minutes in the ring, and you need to ride with exactly that type of confident mindset – your horse feels the energy you put out, and if you set the tone by riding actively forward with a bold, self-assured, confident attitude, the horse will rise to the occasion, and the judge most certainly can tell when you are putting such feeling and expression into your ride. Never question if you deserve to be where you are, doing what you're doing. She concluded by saying that our ride of 1st-2 was just missing a bit of exuberance and activity.

Before performing 1st level test 3, we performed a few circles at the canter to warm up again, and as we were doing so, Kristi coached us on developing a little more hind activity, telling me to not lean back and sit behind the vertical so much and to instead let my shoulders come forward and allow my hips to really swing with the jump of the canter. It wasn't long before she said, "There's your working canter!"

It's crazy to think that focusing on the psychological aspect was able to completely change the way I rode and the test we performed in the way that it did. All I can say is this: attitude truly is everything! As soon as we went down centerline, Kristi said, "I can already tell that there's going to be more activity!" When I rode confidently and boldly from one movement to the next, with my chin up and belly button forward, not only did I enjoy our test even more, but also, our marks improved so drastically that when we finished our final salute, our score was right up there around 70%. Kristi stated how Chai looked like a completely different horse when I rode her that way, and she also mentioned how our impulsion & submission scores, and my rider position and rider effectiveness scores improved by at least half a point during that ride, just because of the lightbulb that clicked on in my mind regarding being bold and really going for it

during your test. “That’s the type of ride that is going to put you in the top of your division at regionals,” Kristi enthused. We received mostly 7s and 7.5s, with a few 8s and only a couple 6.5s.

Day two: Developing collection

The second day of the symposium was more like an actual clinic; each rider got a half-hour lesson with Kristi. For the first few minutes of the lesson, Kristi worked with me on developing more hind activity in the posting trot by pushing up higher off the horse’s back (adding more oomph) and then coming down “as softly as a butterfly.” She then asked what level Chai and I will be competing this year, and when I promptly responded, “2nd level,” the first thing she asked me was what I considered collection to be. I said something along the lines of the horse maintaining the same energy as is present in the working trot, but taking higher, more cadenced steps. She immediately corrected me, describing that the horse must have *more* energy in the collected gaits. She addressed the audience, declaring that she “hates the word collection,” because it leads to many misconceptions; riders and trainers alike hear the word and immediately think slower and “shutting the front door,” when really, it’s not like that at all. Her example was the GP collected gaits – they’re huge! She told the audience (and riders) to picture Glamourdale’s collected gaits, and I think everyone immediately got her point – there’s nothing small or short about that horse’s walk, trot, and canter! For this reason, she instructed me to not even think about the word collection; instead, only focus on determining if the horse has the activity and balance necessary for performing the collected work. We then got right to work on developing the power and energy necessary for a 2nd level “collected” trot.

Because the seat is what Kristi calls the “metronome,” the only aid we have that specifies what gait we want, how big the gait is, and how fast the gait is, it was key in the development of more volume and power in the trot; the more through the horse is and the more their back comes up, the more volume the gait has – and the better the seat is able to follow and accentuate the natural up-down motion of the horse’s trot, the more the back comes up. So, Kristi instructed me to tighten my upper body and allow my seat and hips to bounce up higher and come down softer with each stride of the trot, like what we worked on

at the posting trot. She told me to imagine I was jumping really high up on a trampoline; a concept/phrase that was reiterated many times with various horses and riders throughout the day to develop bigger gaits. After all, as Kristi explained so well, “The motion in your legs and seat is the same motion you want to happen in the horse’s hind legs.” She also told me to imagine sitting directly over the horse’s hind legs, and that every time my seat springs up with the trot, I pull the hind legs forward under the horse’s center of gravity. She then informed me of a fantastic exercise for further development of my following seat: sitting in a chair seat, bounce up and down on a giant yoga ball in a motion similar to what the sitting trot feels like, focusing on allowing the hips to loosen and the seat to bounce up as high as possible, gradually working up to five minutes of this every single day.

The second piece of the puzzle for developing a bigger, not faster, collected trot were soft hands. Because I was holding the reins so tightly, Chai was tight in the neck and topline and unable to develop the hind activity necessary for a big, powerful trot. Kristi explained it best by saying, “If you were to hold a small child’s hand the way you are holding those reins, you would break every bone in their fingers.” By pushing my hands out in front of the saddle, relaxing my elbows, and holding the reins as if I was holding a butterfly in each hand, Chai was able to come more through and confidently reach with her front and hind legs and develop a lovely trot. Using less rein aids and letting go every few strides are things that I really need to work on to further improve Chai’s throughness and collected gaits. Kristi likened the correct hand position to pushing a shopping cart; in the same way, the hands should push away from the rider’s body and to the horse’s mouth.

After establishing more power and activity in Chai’s trot, we began to work on a little bit of shoulder-in; the foundation of all collection. “It takes more energy for a horse to do a shoulder-in than just travel along in a straight line; if you don’t establish more energy and activity beforehand [in the corner], the horse will fade.” Kristi instructed me to use my seat (not my spur!) to power up in the corner (“Don’t think about algebra in the corners, think about energy”), then leave Chai’s head and neck alone and point her outside front leg at either A or C, focusing on maintaining energy and activity in the trot with my seat. “As soon as you lose the activity, go straight,” Kristi instructed us. “Give her enough energy so

she can do the shoulder-in.” At first, it was quite difficult to maintain energy and power during the lateral work, but, through Kristi’s coaching and finally figuring out how to use the corners properly to really build up power, we were able to perform shoulder-ins that resembled, well, shoulder-ins. Soft hands and being able to give played a very important role during the shoulder-ins as well; when Kristi instructed me to come out of the corner, give the inside rein, play a little bit with the outside rein, and push Chai down the longside with my inside rein, the power and activity of the trot and the shoulder-in improved a lot. “That looks like a 2nd level horse,” Kristi declared.

At the canter, we worked on developing a bigger stride and more jump, again by allowing my hips to loosen and my seat to swing more with each stride. We also focused on maintaining soft hands, giving and retaking the reins almost every stride. My elbows also tend to stay back behind my ribcage when they need to be in front of my body and the saddle, so this is another big thing to work on. Kristi had us perform 10 meter circles at the canter to improve Chai’s balance, and then introduced canter-walk-canter transitions during the circle, instructing me to perform the downward on the up, up, up beat of the canter (otherwise, the horse lands on the forehand). “Shorten your reins, keep your hands out in front of the saddle, and focus on her jumping from behind,” Kristi advised. “As her ears are coming toward you you’re going to ask for the walk.”

By the end of the lesson, Chai had truly transformed into a 2nd level horse. “Don’t let anyone know that she’s a little horse,” Kristi said. “They won’t if you ride her big.” “That little trot you did earlier, you can do it on the trail ride, but never again inside this white box.”