

This winter season in Wellington, Florida, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to have a lesson with Nicholas Fyffe at Stillpoint Farm with my mare, Gabrielle. "Gabby", as we call her in the barn, is a German Riding Pony mare who is quite hot. While I was hoping she would be on her best behavior, she was a bit nervous trailering to a new facility to have a lesson. This being said, Nicholas was fantastic in giving me tools to refocus her energy on me. Here are my top takeaways from my lesson:

Ask Small Questions

Because Gabby is highly sensitive and was reacting to a new environment, Nicholas suggested I ride asking small, simple questions every 4 strides. This ensured I was engaging with her, without micromanaging her and helped put her mind at ease. Every 4 strides I would check in with Gabby. For example, I would ride a half-halt to find a more relaxed tempo, or I would add more bend and flexion for a stride. Something small that kept her brain working without "holding" her back when she was nervous or "holding" her together when she got disorganized. Horses learn from making mistakes and receiving small corrections to put them back on the right path.

2.) Don't Ignore Your Horse When Your Horse Ignores You

This one seems obvious but we all do it; we let things slide when our horses don't answer us the first time. Nicholas would remind me to not ignore Gabby if she ignored me. If I asked for a slower tempo in trot or canter and didn't get an answer, I was instructed to make sure I was not ignored! This has always been important with a hot horse like Gabby to ensure that she was on my aids. Submission, of course, improves all aspects of riding. A submissive horse becomes more relaxed because he can better take instruction.

3.) Use Small Aids and Body Weight

Again, being a hot horse, this was a big one for Gabby. Nicholas had me work on using small aids to guide her. For example, we worked on small turns left and right to improve rideability, balance, and attention. Because she responds well to small aids, a large aid overwhelms her when she is reactive. Using my body weight by looking the direction of the turns and being careful to keep my self balanced in the tack helped keeping her focused while engaging her hind legs to the reins.

Nicholas also had me alternate between posting and sitting. This helped Gabby to feel more secure when she wanted to speed up in the trot, and allowed me to influence her from my seat while keeping her back swinging.

4.) Don't Stare at Scary Things!

Gabby was anxious about the entrance to the arena. To ease her mind, Nicholas told me to not stare at the entrance when she approached it and became nervous. Instead, he instructed me to look the total opposite direction with my head and add leg to encourage her to move past it. It seems silly, but my attention on something unrelated worked wonders in calming her mind. After a few times going by the entrances, she believed me when I looked away and pretended to not see what she perceived as scary!

