

## **USDF Instructor/Trainer Certification Workshop:** **Dressage 4 Kids Scholarship Report**

I was given the opportunity to attend the USDF Instructor/Trainer Certification Workshop in Wellington Florida this year while taking part in the Winter Intensive Training Program. The goal of this USDF workshop series is to prepare Instructors and Trainers for USDF certification. Throughout the course of the clinic, potential candidates are walked through the entire certification process. Throughout the clinic there is a theory, riding and training component. Participants first discuss the training scale as a group, and then there are related discussions on how to train horses and students following the training scale principles. Next, candidates are evaluated on their riding and training skills on their own horse, and then on an unfamiliar horse. Finally, during the teaching component, participants first teach a rider/student that is familiar to them, and then must give a lesson to a new student. During the clinic, we mostly focused on the concepts of developing horses and riders to Training and First level.

We began the clinic with theory sessions, held in Lendon Gray's home with FEI Dressage judge and USDF Dressage Instructor/Trainer Program evaluator Bill McMullin. During the theory sessions we reviewed all aspects of the training scale from bottom to top, discussed the importance of word choice and imagery to convey the right feeling to our students and explain how we were training our horses, and discussed strategies for how to develop dressage riders and horses to first level and beyond. At first, I was a little surprised when Bill put us on the spot to answer some pretty thought-provoking questions, but then I realized that I'd never been asked to defend my point of view on aspects of teaching or training before, and doing so was a very useful exercise! Bill's targeted questions helped each of us reflect on "the why" of how we teach and train; why we introduce the leg yield before half pass, why turns on the forehand are such a useful exercise, why or why not can we teach feel, why is there a difference between rhythm and tempo. With every question, Bill looked for us to answer our "why" with knowledge of the training scale, and would provide helpful feedback on how we could make our answers clearer and more succinct when it becomes time for the instructor evaluation.

The next two days of the program made up the training component of the Clinic. On the first day riders rode their own horses, and on the second day riders rode an unfamiliar horse. We began day one of the training component at Warren McMullin Dressage, watching our fellow participants train their own horses under the watchful eye of Bill McMullin. The workshop was structured in the same way as the exam; riders would have approximately 10 minutes to warm their horses up at the walk, trot and canter, and then would have to make an initial assessment about the horse they were riding. Bill was looking for us to present basic information about our horse (age, breed, level of training), tell him what side our horses were stiff/hollow on, give a brief review of the quality of their gaits, and anything else specific we noticed. Next, we were to discuss one thing we thought we could improve throughout the course of our ride, and our plan of how we would go about improving it. Bill encouraged us to concentrate on one thing at training or first level competency that would be easy to improve in one session (such as the stretchy trot, responsiveness to the leg, or lengthenings). Finally, we would implement our plan

of action and come back to Bill and the audience with a recap of what worked and what didn't, and answer any questions they may have. The audience was also asked to take notes and contribute to discussions about each of the riders as we were observing them, to further our knowledge and understanding. After the riders from Warren McMullin Dressage had finished, we headed to the WIT Barn where I presented my four year old lusitano mare, Olympia. After warming Olympia up I decided that my goal for the session was to improve her straightness to the right side and acceptance of the bit using leg yielding and spiral down circles. Bill also suggested trying head- to-the-wall leg yields with Olympia, which I had not yet asked her to do, but she got the idea very quickly and responded with improved connection to the right rein.

During the next day of the training component, riders had to complete the same process riding a horse that was unfamiliar to them. I was lucky enough to ride the beautiful Tomas, lended to me by Phoebe Keliher from the WIT program. Tomas is a 9 year old Hannoverian gelding schooling 4th level. After warming Tomas up, my goal with him was to improve his adjustability in the trot and canter. I started with trot walk transitions to increase responsiveness and encourage him to shift his weight to his hindquarters, then moved to trot/canter lengthenings and collection. At the end of my ride Tomas was significantly more adjustable and better balanced! Bill was happy with the results but encouraged me to continue working on verbalizing my ideas and findings using pyramid of training terminology.



*Getting Feedback from Bill McMullin on my ride with Tomas  
Image Credit: Phoebe Keliher*

The next two days of the clinic were the teaching component, with USDF Dressage Instructor/Trainer Program Evaluator Sarah Martin. The teaching evaluation also follows a very specific format where instructors first present the horse and rider, do a tack check, and assist a 10 minute warm up (in which they assess the horse's gaits and suppleness, as well as the rider's position and influence of aids). Then, instructors formulate and implement a lesson plan based on this information. Finally instructors must cool down the horse and rider while summarizing (to both the student and the audience) what the rider and horse combination accomplished during their lesson, and what next steps they can take to improve their riding going forward.

We began again on day one at Warren McMullin dressage, observing and participating in discussion as the first riders taught their familiar students. Sarah asked the audience to watch each student warm up as if we were going to teach them, and practice formulating a lesson plan. We then shared our lesson plans and got feedback from Sarah, which was so helpful because each person had a slightly different lesson plan which gave me lots of ideas! After the Warren McMullin participants were done, we headed again to the WIT barn, where I taught Becca. Becca is a WIT member who was riding her 6 year old thoroughbred named Whimsy. Whimsy was recently diagnosed with EPM and was still recovering, so Becca requested we didn't do prolonged work in the canter. I guided her through the warm up and then we worked on her adjustability of the trot to obtain a more uphill balance with Whimsy. Sarah said my lesson was clear and effective, just reminding me to be slightly more authoritative in my directions and use the outside leg and seat to support the outside rein.

Day two of the teaching component was certainly the most challenging. Instructors had to teach unfamiliar horse and rider combinations, which is definitely more nerve-racking but is a super lesson in adaptability and great practice for teaching clinics. We began again by watching the instructors at Warren McMullin Dressage, although this time some of the WITees were teaching there. It was so educational to see how everyone handled unique rider and horse combinations with different teaching strategies. I taught Alex, a WITee, on our barn manager Alyssia's horse, Lacey. The lesson began really well. Alex is a very talented rider and Lacey is a big horse for her, so I helped Alex to warm Lacey up and discussed that my lesson plan for today was to increase Lacey's adjustability using leg yields, and responsiveness using a variety of in gait and gait-gait transitions. Alex started to accomplish improved rideability with Lacey early on in the lesson, so Sarah decided to challenge me by instructing me to teach Alex turn on the forehand to improve the balance on Lacey's left hind leg. I struggled with how to explain the turn on the forehand and the feel of the left hindleg to Alex, but Sarah stepped in and was able to show me two different exercises for utilizing this tool.

The Dressage 4 Kids Scholarship not only made it possible for me to be able to participate in this program, but also encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone and try something new. The USDF Certification Workshop was a rigorous and rewarding experience, which solidified my knowledge of the training scale to give me a more formal structure to base both my teaching and training skills on as I make steps towards a professional career. Thank you so much Lendon Gray and Dressage 4 Kids for making this possible!