

## 2016 D4K Winter Intensive Training Program

By Hannah Irons

"Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." ~Dr. Seuss

This seems pretty appropriate for the quote of the day as I come to the sad realization that yet another Florida season participating in the Winter Intensive Training Program (WIT) at Hampton Green Farm has flown by and we are all back home. Wow, what an incredible three months of fun and learning!! It has been such a life changing experience and I have grown so much as a rider. Heading home, I am more inspired than ever and looking forward to what else this year has to bring. I am very thankful to Lendon Gray and Dressage4kids for awarding me such a generous scholarship to support this journey.

The "WITees" started at 6:30 with barn chores followed by fitness training for the rider's. Fitness included yoga, running, T25 workout videos, core strength training or sometimes just a fun game of ultimate Frisbee in the front field. The main focus was ab work because having a strong, stable core is extremely important when riding. We did monthly fitness tests to track our progress and each had a chance to design a workout for the group, which was really fun. Depending on the day, lessons with Lendon usually started at 8:30 followed by lectures in the afternoon. We had many wonderful professionals in the equestrian world come and teach us from vets and farriers to trainers and riders sharing their inspiring stories climbing to the top of the sport. Sports psychology helped us with goal setting. We also learned equine nutrition, breeding, starting young horses, to saddle fitting... we learned it all! One early morning we even visited the Palm Beach Downs race track and watched David Nunn train his lovely thoroughbreds! One of my favorite activities was touring other stables and watching top riders in Wellington school their horses. These riders included Olympic gold medalist for Great Britain, Laura Tomlinson, Mikaela Gunderson, and Swedish Olympian Tinne Vilhelmson to name a few. It is amazing how much you can learn by just sitting and watching a trainer school their horses. I found it fascinating how their training techniques were sometimes very different and yet they are all very successful. After watching these riders, we were always motivated and inspired to apply what we learned to our own horses.

Of course, being able to live in sunny Wellington, the heart of the dressage world for the winter was a highlight. Hampton Green Farm, where our horses were stables, was absolutely stunning as were all of the barns in the equestrian village of "Welly world." The stables looked like big fancy houses and the attention to detail and landscaping is like nothing I have ever seen! The international show grounds, Global, was less than a mile away. We often would ride our horses there for a show or schooling. We would get in our daily fitness by simply running there to watch the Grand Prix! On Friday was hack day and we had great times exploring all the different communities of farms and galloping on the polo fields!

Five lessons a week with Lendon was invaluable and my riding and horses improved so much. Lendon always challenged us to become better trainers for our horses as well as focusing on good horsemanship skills. I like that Lendon also focuses a lot on rider position and that you understand the training aspects of riding, which is very important. Lendon emphasized that to improve one must make new mistakes. If you are going to fix a problem, something has to change and get better or even worse. Experiment a little and challenge yourself. Why practice

mediocrity and the same mistake over and over? A horse simply learns what he practices, he doesn't know right from wrong and has no clue what a perfect half pass is supposed to be like! Lendon encouraged us to always have a plan and goal in mind for that day's ride although you sometimes have to be flexible with that goal when things don't go as planned. But you must have some sort of outline of your ride in your mind of exercises, things you want to work on etc. so your ride is always productive and positive. Continual drilling of a certain exercise, or just trotting or cantering without a plan, is unproductive for you and the horse. With my two ponies one of the main themes throughout the winter was to own every stride and everything needs to be more adjustable. One must be able to make any next stride shorter/longer, faster/slower, ride a transition, go sideways, drop the neck lower or ride your mount deeper, stretch or even do nothing. With this technique, the horse is 100% yours and completely on the aids. Stephanie Beamer also instructed daily and focused on rider's position and how much it influences the horse.

The WITees volunteered at many local events such as the Challenge of The Americas Breast Cancer Fundraiser, demo riders for USDF Trainers Certification and asking for pledges from the audience at The Dressage Foundation's Two Tempi Challenge during freestyles one week at global. We also were given the amazing opportunity to volunteer and audit the FEI level Trainers Conference taught my Johann Hinnimann. It was such an incredible two days of learning from a true master. The demo horses were all amazing and ranged in their training from young horses to grand prix. The main theme of the weekend was developing thoroughness, submission, suppleness, and correct basics before adding more expression and collection to the movements. Johann explained that "Submission is the horse allowing the aids to come in from every direction" and "a good contact is not just with your hands and the horse's mouth, but also with the leg and whole body". He also stressed the importance of true straightness, which is when the horse's spine follows his path of travel. It was very inspiring to watch the horses improvement and we were all excited to get back to the barn to apply what we learned to our rides remembering that Johann said "ideas is training".

As part of the Winter Intensive Training Program I was given the amazing opportunity to personally interview Christine Taurig. She is currently the National Dressage Young Horse coach for the United States and competed in the 2000 summer Olympics in Sydney, helping our country to the team bronze medal. From starting young horses on her family's farm in Germany during her youth, to her experiences at the Olympics and training techniques, I found her life journey with horses very inspiring. I asked her what advice she could share for developing youth riders in the United States and she replied "Find a mentor and submit yourself for a period of time to the system. Make sure it's a good mentor and submit yourself to their program for several years, not just for a few weeks or only the summer. You need to take it all in and really live it from morning until night. It is also very important that you learn to ride and train young horses. Don't think you will become a better rider only because someone explains to you how to ride a half pass or pirouette on a trained horse. Of course that helps, but also learn to develop the athlete and the foundation for a fabulous upper level horse. I have always gotten the biggest thrill from teaching a young horse a proper lengthening, when I can smell an extension waiting to happen. To me it is like jumping a six foot oxer." Christine believed that the biggest misconception in training young horses is that a young horse should not be pushed. She mentioned that "So many trainers kind of diddle around and suddenly when the horse is five

years old they're like 'oh he needs to learn shoulder in and Hunches in'. I believe that you should ride a young horse, even a three year old, three days a week as long as you keep the goal in your mind that you are creating a horse that is trusting. That the horse learns to follow directions and understands the aids of stop, start, left, and right. Also, develop the feel of bending, pushing power, connection, and sideways in baby terms. These things are not pushing too much”

In the last month, my Dressage 4 Kids owned pony Bohdjan and I competed in the Florida Youth Dressage Championships while in Wellington, Florida. It was part of the CDI held during week 10 at the Adequan Global Dressage Festival. We competed in the FEI Pony division and although we didn't have our best rides, it was such a great learning experience competing in my first CDI at such an amazing facility; it was a whole new level for us. On the first day BoBo was a little nervous resulting in a lot of little mistakes. The second day over all I felt we had a much better ride and I was super proud of BoBo for trusting me to go into the big international arena for the first time and trying his best for me. We scored a 63.8+% both days and were the overall champions in the FEI Pony division! There was more than just the riding that made the event so much fun! We were able to attend interesting events and get to know the other riders in the championship of which some were from other countries. All the youth riders went to dinner and learned about the amazing work that Just World International is doing in poor communities around the world. We also played team building games and had a tea reception. The show weekend concluded with the awards ceremony. Competing in the Florida International Youth Dressage Championships was such an amazing opportunity and I am very thankful to everyone for their support and encouragement! A big thank you to Lendon Gray for her excellent coaching, to my mom for always being there for me and to all of my awesome fellow WITees for all of their help and support. I received the final qualifying scores needed with Bobo for this year's USEF Pony Rider National Championships in Illinois. I also competed Charmer, who I have owned and trained up the levels since a foal, in our first FEI pony class. This has always been a goal of mine and so proud of his progress! It has been quite the journey with my little spotted, welsh/Gypsy Vanner “surprise” pony. I am very thankful to Lendon and everyone else who believed we could do it and for their help along the way.

Thank you all who helped make WIT 2016 such a success. First of all, thank you Lendon Gray for selecting me to train in the WIT program once again and for all that you do for youth dressage riders. Your endless support and encouragement in achieving my goals means the world to me. Thank you to our awesome stable manager Karen Clark for making sure our horses received the best care possible and teaching us so much about how to run a top training barn. Without the generosity of Kim and Fred Boyer allowing us to train out of the beautiful Hampton Green Farm, WIT would not be possible. Ali Perkins was the best assistant and fitness instructor and did a great job keeping all of us girls in line! Stephanie, Annie, and to everyone else that also came to teach lessons, thank you, I learned something from each of you. To the many helpful equine professionals that came to teach the excellent lectures and clinics, and those top dressage riders that invited us to your farms to watch you school...thank you. I am especially grateful for having the opportunity to spend time with such compassionate and helpful fellow WITees. I had a blast with all them. I can't forget my awesome roommates, Katrina and Emma, for being such fun and supportive friends. Thanks for putting up with me for three months and being the best roommate's I could ask for, I miss you!! And of course, a huge thank you to my family for all of their help and encouragement on this journey. And last but not least, none of this would be

possible without my amazing ponies, Charmer and BoBo, for giving their best and always being there for me. I will always hold fond memories of Wellington and my time spent at Hampton Green with the WITees. It's been real WIT 2016!!