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Dressage4Kids Grant Essay

Instructors Certification Program

Over the Winter of 2018, I participated in the USDF Instructor Certification Program held in Wellington, Florida. My involvement would not have been possible if not for the generous grant I received from Dressage4Kids which covered the cost of the three workshops I attended. The Instructors Certification Program consists of two parts: the educational workshops and the instructor certification exam. A workshop series is segmented into three, two-day parts including teaching, riding, and lunging. This series was focused on certification at Training and First Level. With each workshop, I learned more about myself as a rider and trainer, and was able to see more clearly my own areas of strengths and those which needed improvement. I would recommend this program to anyone who seeks a clearer understanding of the classical principles of dressage. It is a program rooted in emphasis on correct basics and a systematic approach to our complex sport. I gained an astounding sense of clarity and awareness from this program which I hope to carry with me throughout my career as a trainer.

The first workshop I participated in was the riding workshop. The day began with a lecture on riding theory, where our instructor discussed the essential basics one should have mastered to ride and train competently through First Level. There was great emphasis on the importance of maintaining an elastic, centered seat on every horse you ride. We discussed the shoulder-hip-heel alignment as well as possible faults that may occur to a rider's position (chair seat, collapsing left or right, disjointed hands etc.) One thing which resonated with me is how easy it is to allow small faults in your position to creep in, especially when you are riding and training numerous horses every day. You should train your horse to conform to your correct body position, rather than allow him to conform you to his natural crookedness or misalignment. The remainder of the lectures focused on topics such as achieving thoroughness, defining the gaits, and analyzing each aspect of the training scale. It was refreshing to me to be reminded to look at issues I am having in my riding by going through the training scale. It helped to break down the training process and know where to turn when there are issues along the way.

We were then each tasked with the challenge of riding an unfamiliar horse. We followed a basic outline while riding of how to approach the riding and training of the horse we were sitting on. The outline was: Observe- What is happening, Analyze- Why is it happening, Plan- What can you do to create improvement, Implement- Put your plan into action and analyze the effects, Ongoing Assessment- How will you approach this horse's long term training? This program teaches you to vocalize your thoughts and find the "why" behind what you are doing. I really took away a valuable sense of understanding about how my daily choices effect my horses training long term.

Our next workshop was the Teaching Workshop, which I found to be the most personally valuable for myself. For most of us, it is rare to “learn” how to teach. It is a skill that comes from years of learning yourself and passing on what you know, but it was great to have some clear guidelines as to how to teach the most productive lesson possible. Our lecture focused on how to apply the pyramid of training to assist your students learning, as well as issues which could occur and possible exercises to fix them. The chance to take home so many new exercises which we learned in the program as well as understand the value in their application was very helpful in expanding my own teaching.

Teaching is more than just being able to recognize areas which need improvement and correcting them. The teaching workshops placed serious emphasis on the qualities of a good dressage instructor, ethics, and responsibilities. It is the job of the trainer to foster a sense of belonging and community amongst students, set clear expectations, focus on team work and decision-making, and never lose their own personal love of learning. There is a lot of research behind the material presented in these workshops, and I will be sure to hold on to my packet of information on the components of a lesson, learning styles, and communication. We then were able to put theory into practice by each teaching a lesson under the guidance of our instructor.

Our third and final workshop was the lunging session. It was eye opening to all participants that although we may have had a personal style of lunging horses that we have developed throughout our lives, many of us lacked clarity on why we followed certain practices. We were forced to ask ourselves: What effect does pivoting on one foot rather than moving with the horse have on your circle and control? Why does it matter which side-rein we put on first? What voice commands have we always used, and how does the horse perceive them? It was clear to me after completing this workshop that I may have had the “feel” to lunge a horse well, but I lacked the awareness and experience to be as consistent and accurate as I could be. That is the great value in this program, it provides a solid set of guidelines and a standard we can all return to as we meet and overcome the challenges this industry will unquestionably provide. The chance to be critiqued by our lunging instructor and explain our thought process provided us with solid practice and deeper understanding of what we do regularly.

When testing days arrived, the majority of us were feeling nervous about the close scrutiny our skills would be under. Testing required that we ride both a familiar and unfamiliar horse and explain what we worked on and what we would improve, lunge an unfamiliar horse and explain our analysis, lunge a rider on a horse and give a seat and position lesson, and give unfamiliar rider a formal lesson. As you can imagine, it is easy to become self-conscious about what you know when your every sentence is being analyzed for correctness and effect. My biggest advice having successfully passed the testing is to go in feeling as prepared as possible. The USDF offers so many resources including books and online videos to go in feeling very secure and comfortable with the information. Have a solid understanding of what will be expected of you and know the format of the testing, take advantage of the knowledge the

workshops will provide. I am looking forward to pursuing my certification up the levels and I am endlessly grateful to Dressage4Kids for making this a possibility for me.