

As a new member of D4K, and as an individual with a new awareness of the organization within its entirety, I have been utterly amazed by the offered programs. I am incredibly grateful that D4K is so inclusive within its proliferation of dressage-based education; without their generosity, I would be limited in terms of my opportunities due to finances. Recently I was awarded a scholarship to be a participating auditor at the 2021 Horsemastership clinic. I wanted the content of this article to reflect not only accrued knowledge from this event, but to also serve as a place of advice for riders new to D4K. I personally lacked a mentor coming into these offered programs, but auditing has allowed me to comfortably familiarize myself with the various programs. Perhaps this article is a bit of a survival guide.

Coming into the TEAM/Horsemastership program, you have to be aware that textbook knowledge and hands-on applications are both expected and required. Know those basic horse books you dismiss as “not worth your time”? Do you ignore shared diagrams depicting pieces of tack you use every day? Read them! Understand them! Know them! You should be able to recite basic horse and hoof anatomy as well as parts of tack. Going forward, as your involvement grows, you will be expected to reflect accumulated knowledge to a deeper extent. Some examples of more tasking studies include horse skeleton anatomy, the training pyramid and dressage terminology. An incredible source for learning terms is the USDF Glossary of Judging Terms. This year’s YDF required reading “The Essential Hoof Book” is another source that I found helpful.

There is more preparation to the clinics outside of the paper and pen work. Bring earbuds! The type with wires, too. Coming from a background outside the realm of straight dressage, clinicing with CEECOACHes is a whole new concept to me. If you’re entering into the world of dressage from another discipline, know that your horse has to be fit, and NOT hunter fit. Another eye-opening experience from this clinic was that I am not as fit as I thought I was. You’re probably not as fit as you think you are. One fitness session with Melissa Wortman and *everyone* was sore. Consider doing some push-ups for your clinic prep. Don’t say I didn’t warn you! Also consider bringing some extra no-bows. Saddle fit discussion IS on the table, and actually should be known (as per suggestion of D4K Youth Dressage Festival Stable Management Challenge). Linda Zang utilized no-bows as a temporary fix for backward-tipping saddles, and it certainly helped when people had extra on hand. Better idea, however- check for appropriate fitting tack ahead of time so there’s no reason to cut into your ride! Okay, enough of the big-sistering, but make sure you know your stuff!

I was able to listen in to lessons taught by George Williams, Olivia LaGoy-Weltz, Lisa Schmidt and Linda Zang. My biggest take-away from the horsemastership clinic was that, although varying horses require different training programs, all teachings came back to the correct basics of the training scale. I observed lessons that worked on encouraging consistent contact, acceptance of the rider’s aids, establishing appropriate tempo to address rhythm, etc. Some of my favorite teachings- mind you, I’m a very amateur dressage rider- included...

- You always want the horse reaching down into your hands, and activity must be present for such.

- Don't get locked out by a horse's tightness. Instead, wiggle your way in! Which side is tight? Where specifically are they tight? Then flex here and there until soft.
- You don't want the horse's ears popping back up at you.
- The tallest side of the rider's body should be the inside.
- Ride UP into the corners with a horse that has a tendency to ride downhill.

The learning even went beyond riding. Clair Thunes, an equine nutritionist, taught me the risk of strangulating lipomas compromising the digestive tract in overweight horses. Adrienne Harris discussed the formulation of a business plan as well as budgeting (which really made my Type A heart sing). Paul Loomis and Elena Martinez de Andino were accommodating in answering our questions about the veterinary aspect of breeding practices. Natalie DiBerardinis took time out of her day to discuss conformation and breeding concepts with our group. Jenny Wright followed right down our rabbit hole of veterinary questions and answered everything we presented her. Ashley Madison served as a source of inspiration and wealth of knowledge as to sport horse management. A tour of the Fair Hill Equine Therapy Center opened my eyes to various therapeutic applications for both soundness and respiratory-related issues.

Now that this full week of learning has concluded, I wanted to provide a special thank you to Lendon Gray and the Lendon Gray Scholarship Committee for providing me a special week of educational opportunities. Thank you to Mary Livernois for always entertaining my seemingly endless questions. I am so grateful for the riders and fellow auditors I met through this clinic. I was so happy to share my home farm and passion for young horses with you all! Here's to learning, and to horses, because that's what we're all here for- right?