

## Dressage4Kids 2021 Scholarship Report University of Connecticut Dressage Program

This semester was my first semester on campus and the horse riding teams had their tryouts in September. The teams were going back to their competition schedule and I tried out for their Lower Level Dressage Team. Our tryouts ran similarly to the IDA competitions in which you draw a random horse and you have ten minute to warm up and then ride your test. I drew a horse named Statesman and rode Training Level Test 1; I was placed on Lower as an alternate showing member. I was placed into the Upper Level lessons on Fridays. Below is a lesson log and horse log from my lessons and clinics with the UConn Dressage Team.

### Lesson Log

#### **3 September 2021**

##### **Tryouts**

Today I drew Statesman, a chestnut Morgan gelding. We don't have any lessons before and no coaching during tryouts. I rode this test once before at home on a schooling horse so I was able to memorize it. However I've been jumping a lot and the last time I did a dressage test I think I was working on pieces of First Level 1 at least a good year ago before COVID closed the barns. I heard Statesman is very slow and I will have to use spurs with him. I've never used spurs before in Dressage so hopefully I will have enough time in my ten-minute warm up to learn how to use them.

I didn't really need the spurs with Statesman, he's such a great horse and has the best working trot I've ever ridden in a while. He has a weird canter depart when it feels like he starts cantering with his hind legs for two strides before his whole body canters. It's a very nice balanced canter, however, and he isn't actually that slow. The girls on the team say he just needs to see the spurs to know you mean business. My test scores were between six and seven and comments were for geometry and balance. Our little arena was made up of poles and A and C were not marked so I'm glad I didn't get points off for missing the centerline. I really like Statesman and I think for not riding a Dressage test in a long time I did pretty well.



UC Statesman, Morgan Gelding

## **10 September 2021**

### **Lesson 1**

I was assigned an OTTB mare named Lola. I have never ridden an OTTB before and she is a little moody. I will say she was nothing like Statesman, and I am very used to schooling horses that are too slow, never horses that are too quick. During the lesson we all cantered around and she bolted and I was able to pull her up. I was a little embarrassed, since I was placed into a lesson group high than my showing level and the other girls were very skilled. But I learned that with her I needed very exaggerated half halts. By the end of the lesson I was able to get a controlled canter with her but she did not like to take any contact. I was not very satisfied with the ride and I think I would have liked to spend more practice time with Lola to be able to work on controlling her balance and responsiveness to my “whoa” aids.

## **17 September 2021**

### **Lesson 2**

I was assigned a six-year-old Morgan mare named Ember. Ember needs a lot of help. The staff in the barn said she got away with a lot of bad behaviors in her early training from independent study students a few years ago and she’s a biter and doesn’t understand personal space. Ember bit me on the butt while I was tacking her up in a straight stall and ripped a chain out of the wall. Despite a painful bottom our instructor thought I did quite well on her. She’s extremely quick and I have to circle her often to keep her from trotting off. She needs a lot of work because she has a great need for speed and absolutely no balance. She is quite a bully and I got about three strides of her in a frame at the walk. She doesn’t know any lateral work and when I put my leg on for turn on the forehand she doesn’t understand what that means. I would like to do a lot of groundwork with this horse and I wonder if she’d be a good candidate for independent study.

## **24 September 2021**

### **Lesson 3**

I rode Ember again today, our trainer says I do very well with Ember but I don’t feel like we have very successful lessons. I think Ember needs constant training to make any improvement. My school schedule doesn’t allow it but she’s the kind of horse I think might benefit from three 20-minute sessions a day, six days a week. I’ve written out a plan for doing an independent study with her but I don’t have three 20-minute free periods in my schedule. We are practicing our tests today and Ember can’t do a centerline. Our trainer thinks this is the first time she’s done a dressage test in her life and it shows. She is very confused why we stop in the middle of the arena and Melissa says we will work on centerlines in the future. Our test was not very good and I can’t get much of a free walk from Ember because apparently when she was younger she associated loose rein contact with picking up the trot or canter. Ember is very “U” shaped at all times and getting her to come into a frame takes a lot of half halts and constant bending. I have to counter flex her a little on the straight lines because she can get very crooked. She will snitch on you if you don’t release your half halt by running away.

## **25 September 2021**

### **NEDA Fall Festival**

The UConn Dressage Team volunteered at the NEDA Fall Festival at HITS. It was nice to go back to the show grounds where I competed with Cricket Hill Farm at the LYDF for several years. I was a ring steward both days and the first day I was in Ring 2 where I was able to see all the PSG and Grand Prix Championships. The second day I was in Ring 7 and I saw some lower level tests, and I saw my old trainer on her new baby horse. It was so nice to see everyone from my old riding community again and it was a beautiful day for the festival.

**1 October 2021**

**Lesson 4**

I enjoyed riding Emma this week; she's quick like Ember but much better behaved. Emma is used in first level so it was nice riding her because she has some experience under her belt. We rode outdoors and worked on shallow loop serpentine again. I like doing the shallow loops and our instructor likes doing exercises with change in bend and counter bending. When she comes into a frame she has a very nice working trot. Our lesson ran late so I didn't get to canter much. She is much stronger on the left lead than the right lead and you have to support her so much and almost over correct to help her stay balanced and not stick her head down and spiral in.



UC Emma, Morgan Mare

**2 October 2021**

**Clinic with Guest Instructor**

Celebration was supposed to be ridden in a full bridle but we switched her out for a snaffle. To be fair, at least in dressage she doesn't need the extra bit. She is heavy in the mouth but actually not too bad. You have to half halt her on continually to keep her balanced at the canter but she listens to your aids. We worked a lot on bending and the guest instructor had us look at her at the center of a 20-meter circle or to look at our horse's butt to help our bodies ask for the bend. I knew what she wanted us to do but it hurt my neck. I took centered riding with Jamison Wallace and she always taught me that your "face" is in your core and your hips are your eyes and you turn your hip eyes in the direction you're going and the rest of your body moves with you. This instructor more or less explained that our bodies follow the movement of our head, but I found it really difficult to see where I was going when I was looking at Celebration's butt. Over all I really enjoyed the clinic and I would like to ride Celebration again.

**8 October 2021**

**Lesson 5**

I was unable to go to this lesson, as my entire dorm floor was sick from mold in the building. I was so sick that I could barely drag myself to class and while I'd rarely miss a chance to ride for anything, I didn't think I'd be able to stay on. I wasn't able to schedule a make up lesson this week because I was so sick I ended up going to urgent care three times.

**15 October 2021**

**Lesson 6**

In this lesson I rode UConn's best horse, Nightstar. Nightstar is a really good bean. We ran through our tests in this lesson and Nightstar is just the best. He knows what his job is and is probably the equivalent to a first level academy schoolmaster. Nightstar doesn't like a lot of contact in his mouth and will come round from your seat aids. His canter is fantastic, however as I was the last one to go for our test-run through Nightstar was very tired and he broke the canter at one point. Nightstar is an older gentleman and gets tired and cranky. This was also the last lesson of the week and he was used several times in the week so he earned his right to be slow this lesson. I would love to ride him on a day he's less tired to see what his full potential is like. Otherwise, he did a great test and the poor guy was waiting to go for 30 minutes.



**22 October 2021**

**Lesson 7**

I started this lesson on Ember again and she was her usually grumpy self. I think I will try to do an independent study with her next semester to work on her ground manners. She's always trying to bite everyone and she knows how big she is and uses this to her advantage to bully anyone near her. She's an absolute tank and will just barge through anything in her path even if it's not very pretty. Our lesson was as civil as I could get her to be and we had a decent left lead canter but she has no idea what stopping in the center of the arena means which is just fantastic since the team is getting her assigned to us as a permanent dressage horse. She's not very good at anything else and needs a lot of training. A dressage horse that can't do a centerline is quite a feat to work on. Another rider who was doing a test at a show the next day switched with me to do the test on Ember as she was "slightly" better equipped to do the test than her horse, Excalibur. Excalibur is a small little pony with a four beat canter but he's a good bean. I finished the lesson on him going centerline exercises.



UC Ember (left) and UC Excalibur (right)

**29 October 2021**

**Lesson 8**

I was assigned Ember again. I would have ridden Statesman but a team member from a lower level was moved to our lesson time and we did a horse switch. Today we're focusing on lateral work and I think Ember will need some ground training. UConn received a horse donation and he's a superstar. Our trainer took advantage of the good horses (except Ember) in the lesson to work on leg yielding, shoulder in, and turn on the forehand. Ember literally can't do those things because she never learned them. Ember was in the Little International program and the seniors said she started learning lateral work and then when she went into independent study they didn't continue with her. I started the lesson mounted and we would do turn on the forehand by asking the horse to halt six feet away from the rail and then do a 180° turn and change direction. Getting Ember to halt today was enough of a work out so I got off her and tried the exercise with a training stick. Most of the time Ember would like to walk into me and run me over and I remembered from my independent study with Shabazz in the summer that you have to pick your spot and say: "horse, this is my space, don't get in." Ember needed a lot of convincing but I was able to get her to do a few steps. It's hard to remember sometimes that you have to exaggerate your praise with the younger horses so they know what they've done is correct. The other team members helped me with some of the aids and suggested I praise Ember after every one step at a time. When I got back on Ember wanted to charge around but I was able to get just a few steps out of her. She's learning.

**30 October 2021**

**UConn Dressage Home Show**



Since I am an alternate showing member I did not compete in this show. I was a horse-holder for the first level and a test runner for the rest of the day. The day's work went on for about ten hours or so, so pretty much the usual amount of time for a horse show.

## 5 November 2021

### Lesson 9

I rode Shabazz again!! I haven't ridden Shabazz since the summer when I did an independent study with him. Over the summer Shabazz and I had some struggles and he had to learn some basics. He's just a little boy, only six years old, so he didn't understand that there are different kinds of aids for moving off a rider's leg. Through out the summer we worked on getting him more forward and doing in hand and mounted lateral work. When I rode him in this lesson my little bean was so much better improved! He's much more forward now and can hold a balanced canter for several laps around the arena. He's still a little slow in the head-he has the right idea but the execution is not always great. For instance, we did 180° turns on the forehand along the arena walls and although I had parked him a good six feet away from the wall he still got his head stuck in the polo nets and I had to pull him out. He tries really hard and he can do turns on the forehand now from the ground without me having to touch him with the training stick. Mounted, he is just starting to get good at walk and trot leg yielding. Such an improvement in our ride, I'm very happy with him.



Shabazz on 5 November 22 (left) vs Shabazz on 8 July 22 (right)

**12 November 2021**

**Lesson 10**

I rode Ember again. Ember now has to be in double crossties because her ground manners have not improved. Ember looks like she had other plans for today but I've ridden her enough now to not let her get away with such nonsense. We did canter depart exercises today where we walk a ten meter circle to establish connection and bend and then go straight into a trot for a few strides and immediately into the canter on a straight line and then into a canter semi circle to a trot. Ember really likes cantering exercises because she likes speed so she kept anticipating the canter and losing the connection. I had to switch things up and do a small loop figure eight into the canter. She was able to pick up some pretty decent canters and had two good balanced down transitions. Ember needs very dramatic half halts, which I learned from Lola. I feel a little silly doing them because the "release" part of the half halt is so exaggerated but it works with her. She's six, granted, so she will likely need a lot of exaggeration of aids before she understands what they mean more subtly. If I could do it with Shabazz, I can try it with Ember.

**19 November 2021**

**Lesson 11**

I had to switch into an earlier lesson with the Intro riders because my parents wanted to get me as soon as possible to bring me home for break—I didn't even get to enjoy my last day on campus! I ended up getting assigned a Quarter Horse mare, Tardy for the first time. I worked with Tardy over the summer on groundwork after she had been seen by the veterinarian for melting. She was scoped and examined and it turned out she would just fall on the ground when you cinched her western girths. When I tacked her up over the summer she did quite literally "melt" and collapse on the ground in slow motion. Our veterinarian said it looks like she is doing that as an evasive behavior rather than physiological illness. Our trainer and barn manager noticed she prefers the English tack so she has been used frequently for Intro dressage. She is very, very slow and requires spurs and a dressage stick. When I got on I found she is the opposite of Ember and needs a lot of encouragement to go anywhere. I don't think she's necessarily lazy, but I think her top speed is just not very much. Tardy needs a lot of help staying straight and bending. She's as long as a bus and stiff as a PVC pipe so it takes a lot of warming up to get her loose enough to bend. I did a lot of spiral in's and shallow loop serpentine's. We ran through our test and it took a lot of effort to get her to do a canter corner and keep the canter balanced down the long side of the short arena. Tardy tries. I think she would benefit from carrot stretches if she cared about carrots more. She's a good horse though and she was quite different from Ember. I'm used to riding horses that need to get more forward but it had been quite a while since I'd ridden a horse this slow. She really challenged me to remember the exercises I had done at home to work on bending long, crooked horses.

**26 November 2021**

**Fall Break**

No Lesson at home this week, I took some shifts at the Equine Hospital and did some bone scans.

**3 December 2021**

**Lesson 12**

I rode Tardy again today, I have to use spurs and a whip on her and she is so slow. Lately I've been riding either Tardy or Ember and it's too fast and too slow. It's certainly making me as a rider learn to quickly adapt to the horse and practice getting a horse to move off my leg vs. listen to my seat aids. One thing I've taken away from this lesson program is that not riding easy horses teaches you a lot. When I go home to ride Montana after riding horses that don't know lateral work I think it'll feel quite different on him. He

used to be a western ranch horse-converted-jumper but can still go diagonally and sideways all over the arena if you ask him. Today I really tried not to rely on the spurs to get Tardy moving but some of the other team members said it looked like I got her moving as fast as she could go. Poor one-speed Tardy. Tardy is very reluctant to maintain a good canter and we did circle exercises where you trot through curved poles and then ask for the canter. Our trainer gave me permission to use the whip on her when she doesn't respond to my leg aid and she bucks a little when you do. Poor Tardy was so mad that I made her canter and she was sweating pretty heavily by the end of the exercise so I had to get off to cool her down because she was over it. At least she didn't melt.

**10 December 2021**

**Lesson 13**

I rode a polo pony! I have not ridden a polo pony before but the barn wanted the polo horses exercised on the last day of lessons, so I rode a horse named Princess. Princess is a little red thoroughbred mare but has the personality of a unicorn. She's cute as a button but so crooked. The polo team likes her but she's not the best at polo because she doesn't have the bolting characteristics they prefer in their horses. In order to get a good canter from her you need to check the box on everything. She will snitch on you if you're leaning too far forward or if you tighten up by not picking up the canter. She needs a lot of help going straight and likes to fall in on circles but I think she has the potential to make a good intro dressage horse. It takes a while into the lesson to get her in a frame but she has very nice walk moments. She is very attentive, and like Shabazz, she really tried to do the lateral work but gets confused easily. At one point I hopped off to show her what I meant from the ground, which she understood and I tried again mounted and she will move off your leg a little better. Princess likes to think ahead sometimes and assume she understands what you want even if it's not quite right. You have to use a lot of half halts with her to let her know, this is what I want from you now. Thank you. Princess has good manners and I think she was relieved that I didn't tape horse parts on her today as she's been my assigned horse in Horse Science Lab and lately I've had to "pin the parts" on her with colored tape. After the lesson I discovered horse tongues work on phones because I was listening to Spotify while I cleaned her off and she started licking through the songs.

**17 December 2021**

**Finals Week, Horse Trail Ride with Dr. Nadeau**

Oh Ember. Ember is used on trails because she doesn't spook at anything. She doesn't have the time to since she's going too quickly. Ember is quite the tank and although I felt like I'd ridden her enough during lessons to make progress with her in the arena, out in the trails was different. The trails were really beautiful and a nice way to end the semester but I was having a lot of difficulty controlling Ember. Most of the time I had to have an extremely deep seat and keep her in a frame the entire time. At one point she cantered up behind this gentle gelding and tossed her head onto his croup and he kicked her. At this point I decided it might be safer for me to switch horses with the trail TA because I didn't want to put the other horses in a dangerous position. I switched and rode Celebration who I had not ridden since the clinic and she was very nice. For the rest of the trail ride I heard the trail TA in the back of the group singing to Ember to keep her from trotting away. Maybe I should try singing to Ember next time. I've spoken with Lisa, our barn manager about doing an independent study with her and whipping her into shape so she'll have some skill for our Dressage Team text semester. I don't like to have a negative relationship with a horse and I think I would like to improve my skills working with Ember. She is quite the challenge and I would like to solve her.



## Conclusion

I spent most of the semester riding Ember and although our time together was sporadic, I think I made some improvement, minus the trail ride. Usually I would do whatever I could to avoid a difficult horse but these girls on the team go head first into working with the difficult horses because they want their team horses to be the best. This has encouraged me to want to work with Ember more and challenge myself. I have an independent study on the schedule next semester with Ember and hopefully we can make some progress. I really enjoyed my little reunion with Shabazz and enjoyed getting to ride an OTTB and a Polo pony for the first time this semester. UConn introduced me to a lot of different horses at many different skill levels. I've never ridden so many horses that were less educated than me, I am used to horses that know more than I do like schoolmasters. I suppose you never really know if you're ready for it until you're thrown in the saddle and you have to ride whichever horse you draw. After fourteen years of riding I was surprised that: hey, I can do it! I *do* have the skills to ride these green horses. I'm looking forward to next semester.

Here is a list of goals I have for my Independent Study with Ember:

- Objectives
  - Rid Ember of her bad ground manners
    - Biting people
    - Stepping on people's feet
    - Running up other horse's butts
    - Bull dozing
  - Teach Ember some in hand lateral work
    - Turn on the fore hand
    - Turn on the haunches
    - Shoulder in along the wall
    - Leg yield on a circle
    - Leg yield on a straight line
  - Teach Ember some transitions
    - Find the brakes!
    - Many, many, many centerline practices
    - Halt to Walk to Halt to Walk to Trot to Walk to Halt
  - Teach Ember some bending exercises
    - Shallow loop serpentines
    - Spiral in, spiral out
    - In hand stretches
  - Trail manners
    - In hand hill work
    - Lunging in the field
- Time line
  - Learn centerline before home spring show
  - Learn ground manners before home spring show

We just found out that UConn is delaying opening until February so I will be losing two weeks of work with Ember. Unfortunately I will only be working with her three times a week for an hour but between three sessions and the dressage lessons on Fridays she will still be getting a lot more dressage training in.