

## 1. Hannah Irons Scholarship Report May 2025

Looking back at the incredible Florida season, I am fortunate to have been awarded the 2025 Christian Kennedy Memorial Scholarship through Dressage 4 Kids. Oded Shimoni, an international Grand Prix rider and trainer based in Wellington generously donated his time. I trailered over to his farm twice weekly January-March for lessons and learned so much. Below is a summary of some of training notes and the biggest take aways from my lessons with Oded.

I recall this winter Oded mentioned “if you are asked what you learned from my training tell them nothing we didn’t learn at summer camp.” Basics, basics, basics, but always ride with a vision for the future. “Every day you need to ride to your best belief of what a Grand Prix horse feels like.” Whether they are 4 or 10 years old. Every reaction to your leg, every transition, every set up for a half pass. It’s way easier to teach them now than when you have to piaffe. Never skip the 4yo stage of basic riding. Correct responses to the aids. Forward, short, easy bending, sideways, neck up or neck down. Every ride. It is important even on an FEI horse. Think that everything is a working gait for the next exercise. A haunches-in is the working gait for a half pass. A half pass is the working gait for a schooling pirouette, then a schooling pirouette is the working gait for a smaller pirouette for example.

I greatly appreciated Oded’s attention to detail on rider position and accuracy. One of the first lessons Oded told me “Professional riders push their horses into the corner (with inside leg) not pull them into the corners with the outside rein.” You’d think I’d know how to ride a corner by now (sorry Lendon) but we all must be willing to continue grade school basics in dressage sometimes. Oded also made it a priority that riders must live on the diagonal and centerline until they are just as comfortable doing everything there as they are on the wall. When riding tempi’s or half pass be committed to your line always. Even in breaks, practice your best marching extended walk TO THE LETTER every day. For a better extended walk, he had me thinking of the front legs reaching more towards the destination to free up the shoulders. Even a walk should have an element of uphill.

Like training horses, when teaching riders we must do the opposite of what our body wants to do naturally. In addition to being told too many times to not nag and help the horse with my leg, Oded often told me to sit in and feel what’s under your seat before starting to push or drive the horse with my seat. I found this very helpful. He warned to be careful not be constantly to be sitting in a quicker tempo that the horse is offering in the canter. Especially on a lazier type because then they get use to that driving support. We can drive with our seat to make them quicker and make something happen but then we must sit back and lose. We can’t help the horses so much. They have to carry us. I learned I can’t be so afraid of it falling apart because I stopped working hard or took my leg off for example. The horse

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will be honest. If they quit, then they are not in front of you and then it's time to do something about it.

Oded has incredibly high standards for his horses and riders and greatly inspired me too as well. My favorite line all winter was "your standards can't just be high enough for Maryland, they have to good enough for Aachen." Oded really pushed me outside my comfort zone. He didn't accept any reasoning that my horse doesn't know it or he isn't ready. Just because the horse or rider is green does not mean I was allowed to be satisfied too quick or give up. He helped me realize that "its ok for it to fall apart. Sometimes you just need to start doing it and stop hand holding them-waiting for them to feel ready. He said "We can talk about swimming all day but at some point we have to do it. Sink or swim." From there we can make it better. Oded commented I sometimes wait too long waiting for the perfect moment when instead I need to learn to create the perfect moment and make the movement happen. "The warm up is for creating the good feel and basics then you need to commit to the accuracy and getting it done. Then you can go back and get the feel you want and polish the movement." Afterall that's what we have to do in the show ring.

On the topic of forward.

"Accepting the leg doesn't mean that you can put your leg on, it means the horse responds correctly to the leg." A hot horse and hot to the leg are two different things. Regardless of what horse I was riding, pretty much every lesson had an element of bring them back so I could test the forward reaction to my leg. Pretty much on repeat. Oded said I often "ride in survival mode" of going just forward from riding a bunch of babies. This winter I learned to be more comfortable in collection. A true test of forward is that we can keep the horses short and bring them in to a slower tempo without them getting behind us. This is what makes the best FEI riders in the world. I also became very aware this winter that you need a motivated horse to do the Grand Prix.

Chasing the horses forward is often just covering up the problem. Bring them small and ask them to stay quick and you will see honestly how in front of you they are. We must demand that the horse gets quick to the first aid, or the rider must get loud with leg and seat if needed if there is no reaction. Then push them forward outside of comfort zone then bring back to neutral. If you do it enough times they will start to respond to the first leg aid. "The horse must think that you are crazier and more persistent than they are." In addition, I realized it's super important that the horse moves forward because of the precise leg aid not our just body/energy or because we gave away the contact without realizing it.

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There are many reasons why a horse might not want to go forward but remember “if he is loose and supple it’s easy to push him forward.” I learned that it’s important to make sure my horses are giving to the energy up front in the bridle and I’m not just fiddling them off the bit temporarily. Oded was very adamant about not letting the horse change the subject because of a mistake. We must finish what we started and sometimes fight for it a little more. For example, if they break to canter when pushing the trot for more power, don’t stop driving...send forward in canter until they are in front of you then push them sideways back to trot and release the aids when they do the right thing. Oded said “the best trainer in the world is the one who releases the pressure the quickest at the right moment.”

Several lessons consisted of schooling the short or pirouette canter on my 3<sup>rd</sup> levelish horses in preparation for teaching pirouettes. First, we did a lot of go very forward in medium canter and back to short canter on a circle. Two steps gallop then bring them back to collected canter until they got quick to the aids and sharper in the rhythm of the hind legs. Oded often used the line “make his hind legs hit the ground twice as quick for a few steps.” Then find a moment to be quiet and back to a sweet spot collected canter-back in the comfort zone. Then start again challenging the canter to be short and quick for 3 or so strides. “He needs to want to take off but you hold him back in the front.” It’s important to make them go out of the pirouette or short canter not just take a break and allow them to leave collection by giving the reins away. Oded often said it’s important that the horse lets you influence them with the whip in canter as an aid to quicken and keep the rhythm of the hind legs. Not as a punishment or something the horse stiffens or reacts negatively too. A correctly timed touch of the whip is very helpful to keep the canter in the pirouettes on a horse that is learning. We often did a very short canter until that was easy and additionally the horse must have an easy haunches-in at the canter. With those two ingredients you should be able to from short canter turn a real pirouette for a few steps, keeping them short on the outside hind leg. Oded said the problem with always spiraling down for a pirouette is the horse never learns the preparation and entry which is the hardest part.

Oded is a big utilizer of counter canter particularly as a collecting and strengthening exercise. Often, he would have me collect the canter in the corner and really sit them down. Oded also taught me how important it is that they listen to your legs in the counter canter not just the positioning. You should be able to bend and straighten them from your legs in counter canter without them anticipating a change. If they do anticipate stealing a change in counter canter, he would have me ride a haunches out or half pass towards the

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wall to make them attentive to the leg. “You need to be able to half-halt and collect in the corner like you are going to do a canter pirouette.”

#### 5 favorite exercises

1. Medium trot, then bring back half 10 meter circle in haunches in, then medium trot on a line again then repeat. This was very helpful on a horse then tends to leave hind legs behind them and for horses that take over and get strong or on forehand.
2. Canter pirouette exercise- start a very collected canter on the rail. Add haunches in then turn half a pirouette as small as you can, then half pass back to the rail. I found this very helpful on teaching pirouettes on two different horses this winter.
3. Leg yielding on circle at walk and trot was a favorite warmup exercise. No more sideways than you can keep the integrity of the gait and horse in front of you.
4. Before riding tempi's be able to ride a few steps half pass off the wall, change, a few steps half pass back to the wall and change. The important part is to really take your time to set up each change and make the horse wait.
5. Walk pirouette to canter pirouette. Also, riders should be working on their walk pirouette/turn on haunches every day. Change it up. Sometimes small, sometimes bigger. Always think of “inside hind stepping towards inside stirrup.”

#### Fun analogies worth sharing

1. “Think of if you are driving the horse in a carriage. They take you forward and pull you just steer and direct the energy.”
2. Imagine “that you are on water skis. The horse must want to pull you forward and push into the bridle.”
3. “What does a straight piece of cardboard do when stood up? It falls down. Now bend it on a curve-it stays up! Same with a horse if its bending correctly in a corner.”
4. Add 20% power at the end of every line of extended trot, canter or tempi changes.” So many horses learn to fade as the corner approaches. And riders let them.

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5. You should be able to see the whole crownpiece of the bridle if the poll is the highest point. Its important to exercise the up neck muscles and the lower deeper frame muscles.

This winter was an incredible learning experience and my riding and horses have greatly improved. I cannot thank Oded enough for pushing me outside my comfort zone and supporting the youth of our sport. I am very grateful to Anne Baber Wallis, Lendon Gray, and Dressage 4 Kids for their generosity and believing in me. It was an honor to ride in memory of Christian Kennedy and I can't wait to share the inspiration, knowledge, and kindness that I experienced this winter.