

Clinic with Kristi Wysocki, Feb. 8-9

As the debut “public” outing of my rising 5-year-old Westphalian/Connemara gelding, LG, there was a lot resting on the overall success of this experience as his initial exposure to a crucial aspect of the sport. Naturally, our main goal was to provide a positive experience during the sessions rather than accomplish anything in particular, but his behavior so surpassed any expectations we had for him that our sessions were extremely productive and insightful. Kristi spoke of the necessity of always remaining sympathetic to the physical and mental development of the young horse; they do not willfully respond “incorrectly” because they want to be defiant, but because they lack the proper understanding to respond in a correct manner, or even because of occasional discomfort associated with the physical development of the young horse. A large focus of our work was correcting various aspects of my position and aids that, if ignored, could hinder his development and understanding in the future. She reminded me of the importance of never “cutting corners” in his development, especially not in something as easily corrected but as potentially influential as my lower leg position and aids.

I started developing the bad habit of bringing my leg too far back and up to create the response that his lack of understanding of the leg aid made difficult to capture at the correct position at the girth. Him becoming slightly “behind the leg” at times is not disobedience, but rather a reflection of his lack of understanding, which should not be addressed by simply using a stronger aid. The result of this imprecision was illustrated very clearly on the second day of the clinic, when I placed my outside leg too far back during a canter departure, and he bucked in response to the poorly placed aid. Instead, I was advised to employ more subtlety with my outside leg and position my seat for the canter, which produced a calm and elegant transition. The other major correction that Kristi recommended was bringing my hands closer together and

always ensuring that my thumbs stay on top, and allowing my elbows to relax and hang at my sides. She spoke often of self-carriage, and allowing the horse to establish the contact rather than holding the horse's head and neck in an artificial contact, and of the necessity of the correct placement and use of the hands and elbows for this to occur. Thankfully, these two were the only prominent issues that need to be resolved, and Kristi was very encouraging about his training and development so far, but she also warned me of going too fast with him or allowing others to persuade me to do so when he isn't strong enough yet.