

Training Grant 2014 by Pam Sellers

I chose to use the Rutland Riding Club training grant towards a 2 day dressage camp held at Oakridge Arena, near Newark where the facilities were the very best for horse and rider which was a good job because the weather was pretty bad with rain and gusty winds.

I took Felix, my 7 year old who is competing at Novice level dressage and schooling towards Elementary. There were 20 people and their horses at the camp and we all arrived on Friday afternoon to settle the horses into their luxury loose boxes, have a good look around before a debrief and supper. During this part we had to set ourselves some short term goals we hoped to achieve during the weekend and also looking ahead some medium and long term goals.

Day 1. My first session was ridden instruction with trainer, Andrew Fletcher. After a warm up, giving Andrew chance to watch us in 3 paces plus some leg yielding Andrew wanted me to do the leg yield against the wall of the arena. This gave Felix something to help keep him on a constant line but also helped me to keep a feeling of a good angle. He had to really use his hind leg stepping under his body. The arena wall at Oakridge does not have corners, they are rounded, so I could continue the exercise the whole way round. Felix is a little stiffer to the right so we did this for 2 – 3 circuits, had a little break and picked up on the other rein which he found much easier. Next we moved on to some Travers. In the walk I rode a square and used ¼ pirouettes to turn the fore hand around and maintaining the travers positioning. Then we progressed to the same exercise in trot. Felix tried hard to do this for me but had a few wobbles and lost position trying to turn it into a leg yield.... Andrew said this was normal and we just came back to walk and started again. It is only by repetition that he will learn.

After lunch I did a workshop with David Collins who is a sports psychologist. His session taught us how to focus, relax and put yourself in the right 'place' to cope with stressful environments. Also I learnt how to deal with things or people that act as a drain on your energies.

Next I was back on my horse to ride a test and I could choose any long arena test. I chose Novice 39 and armed with my new found relaxation skills off we went to ride it. The test was being videoed to look at later. It went quite well apart from a messy canter strike off and modest medium trots. It scored 69%, so not bad. Andrew was the judge. Afterwards he talked me through the marks and how he wanted me present it the next day when we would do it all over again.

Then it was time to settle Felix down, have a shower and eat. After supper we all watched each other's test on a big screen and had our score sheets to hand. This is a really useful learning tool. A quick kiss good night for Felix and off to my camp bed.

Day 2 followed the same format. My lesson with Andrew was based around my short term goal setting. I wanted to do some sitting trot on my big moving horse. Firstly I needed him in front of my leg and Andrew wanted him to be reactive to my aids so I had to tap him with my whip and aim to keep my lower leg very still. So I used just my whip each time he started to slow down and not spring forwards from a light leg aid. Soon we were going round with an active forward rhythm and Felix was trying very hard. I think he really responded to this way of going. Once the trot stayed there, I was able to use a light leg to maintain the trot and then keep it still. It felt amazing. I did have to revert back to rising every now and then as it was very hard work and I didn't want him to become sore. Next I wanted to try some simple changes which Andrew asked me to do on a small figure 8. We had to concentrate on slight shoulder in position coming into the downward trans but achieve the straightness

and new bend before the new strike off. Andrew wants me to develop my canter strike off aids so that Felix will go upwards from only my outside leg aid applied lightly. I felt this exercise went fairly well and so did Andrew, but that it was very much a 'work in progress'. He says another 2 months' work to confirm it. We then did a bit of medium trot practise before stretching in both trot and walk. I need longer reins apparently to let Felix take his nose down. More expense...

After lunch Felix had a little rest while I did an Equipilates session with Lindsay Wilcox-Read. This involved various stretches. We used some apparatus: a stool, mat, ball, prickle ball and a wobble board. We played a game where we were trying to balance on the wobble board and throw and catch a balls from each other at the same time. I loved this.

Back on board Felix, stretched and ready to do my last session; riding the Nov 39 test again. Felix, surprised me as he was still full of energy, I thought he would be tired out. He produced probably his best work to date. It was mistake free and accurate but he showed power and relaxation when needed. His canter transitions felt fabulous but one of the medium trots could have shown more push from behind. We scored 73% so an improvement on day 1. My final chat with Andrew consisted of him saying that I needed to always try to produce Felix into an uphill frame, forwards energy to an even consistent contact. My riding must be braver and bolder.

I had a superb time away with my horse, received very good instruction in fabulous facilities, met some new dressage people and ate tasty healthy food all weekend. I want to thank Rutland Riding Club for their generous grant that I put towards my training.

