

## Rutland Riding Club Training Grant Report

### Kathryn Hibbins and Waffle

I was delighted to have won one of the vouchers for Training at the AGM last November and decided to put the money towards a clinic that the British Dressage Northern Region organised with Spencer Wilton at Vale View in September.



I had felt for a while that Waffle wasn't very secure in the contact he took from the double bridle I had been riding him in for a few years. My trainer, Alison Woulds, and I had used it to help Waffle work correctly over his back after a diagnosis of hock spavins had made it all clear as to why he was always struggling to work correctly. The bridle and bits had done their job up until recently but now we felt that he wasn't quite happy. A dental check had also indicated that he was grabbing the bits with his teeth, causing a tiny bit of wear. Not a perfect scenario.

So, with this in mind, off I went with a friend acting as groom, to Vale View. I was really keen to see what Spencer may have to say about Waffle's way of going and the contact issues we had. Arriving early, I was able to watch a few lessons before mine, and really liked the way he taught, always with the horse's long term development and ability in mind. He had a great eye for detail and seemed to pin point issues with the other horses very quickly.

Our turn came, and having warmed up outside, we went into the International Arena to meet the man. Having walked, trotted and cantered on both reins, and given him a brief history, Spencer immediately zoomed in on what he thought was our weakness. He saw that Waffle was using only the top two thirds of his neck when working and instead of relaxing through the jaw and neck; he was tensing and leaning on the bridle to support himself. Being on the other end of the rein, I was holding him up a lot and hence a bit of a battle was ensuing as the contact was not a two way communication through the rein. He also thought that Waffle was unhappy with the bits in his mouth and so the Weymouth bit was removed, and we worked in the snaffle.



We worked on the absolute basics of getting Waffle to soften through the neck and use the muscle fully in front of his withers to balance himself. His head had to be level and he had to have the correct amount of bend at all times which required constant tweaking with the inside rein whilst holding the outside steady with a downward pressure to ask him to stretch and lower his head from the base of his neck. The inside rein was asking all the time for a tiny bit of bend and the softness. Previously, when ridden in a snaffle, Waffle has always fought and pushed his nose out, however, having built up his strength over the last few years, he was much more receptive to working in a simpler bit. He found it difficult, especially in the right canter, but we achieved a better way of going which was still very much a work in progress when the lesson ended. The aim was to build on the exercise to get him to work in true self carriage.



Throughout the lesson, Spencer was very involved and nothing escaped his attention. If I wasn't quick enough to make a correction, he spotted it and saw before I felt, that Waffle was about to drop behind the leg. His way of teaching made the lesson great fun, but also sharpened up my resolve to be more disciplined and accurate. I had to help Waffle by being crystal clear with every message I gave him. This is something that we all know, but from time to time, we need a reminder and a bit of a kick to ensure we concentrate and act on it. Spencer also has a great sense of humour and I was quite puffed after riding and laughing a lot of the time!

Back at home, I have practiced with Waffle, only riding him in a snaffle, and his way of going is improving. I had a session with Peter Hales, and more recently have seen Alison again, when we have worked on his contact and at our last training session with Alison, she saw, and I felt that he was more often than not in self-carriage and his neck, jaw and top line were relaxed and soft. As always, there is room for improvement but I am excited that we may be able to obtain the consistency of softness, relaxation and suppleness in a test which has always eluded us.

Thank you to Rutland Riding Club for the generous Training Grant which enabled me to start this journey with a great trainer. I would recommend anyone who has the chance to have even one session with Spencer – he is a great horseman and a lovely guy.

Kathryn Hibbins

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