

Riding Club Training Grant 2014/15

Way back in February, on the recommendation of my close friend Nicky Thomson, I signed up for the BHS Training Camp at the Animal Defence Centre, Melton Mowbray organised by Sally Andrews. It was quite expensive and I was a little anxious about the standard of riding that would be required but I sent off my personal details and relevant information about my TB mare, Poppy. However, during the spring I followed up my concerns about Poppy's increasingly, erratic jumping behaviour with various medical checks. These culminated in x-rays showing she had severe 'kissing spines' in five dorsal vertebrae. Operating was an option but after considerable deliberation and dilemma, I decided against an operation and, with heavy heart, started looking for a new horse.

So on Friday 26th of June, I arrived at the camp with Copper, a 9 year old but rather green ISH gelding, who had come home only 8 days earlier. We were fortunate to have a team of 4 very skilful and engaging instructors: Peter Hales and Sam York plus 2 British Army Cavalry Officers, Mark and Adam and, of course, access to excellent facilities.

After settling the horses into their stables, meeting the other 10 riders and getting the 'lie of the land', we tacked up for an evening assessment ride in the huge indoor school. It was a pleasant change to be riding a horse who maintained a calm composure and observe as one or two other people dealt with more temperamental horses! Peter and Sam sorted us into rides ready for a prompt start on Saturday morning.

It is said that 'an army marches on its stomach' and over the weekend our riding schedule had to fit around the routine of the Mess – Lower Ranks not Officers!! That meant feeding and mucking out at 6.30 am in time for a 7 am breakfast (and a rather early 5.30 pm evening meal). As we were not there for culinary delights it was not a problem, however, Peter managed to draw the 'short straw' a couple of times with missing food or dropped food or being served inedible food!!



Part of the learning was done through observation and discussion, so at 8.30 am half of us watched Sam teach a flat work session in the indoor school. Peter led the discussion about scales of training, the horses' different ways of going and how the riders were influencing their horses. At 10 am, we swapped over and Peter taught my group (after an amusingly delayed start caused by one horse that pulled away while being led to the mounting block and then refused to be caught for 10 minutes). We all learned useful exercises to help supple and balance our horses and enjoyed the discipline of riding as a group. I was pleased with the way that Copper had been going but was very conscious that his saddle was slipping to the right. Peter suggested using a girth without any elastic and Sally kindly whisked me into Melton at lunch time to get a new one.

In the afternoon session, we all did some type of pole work and/or jumping. The most experienced horses and riders opted for a cross country session with Mark and Adam. In the super jumping field, which has a mixture of cross country and show jumping fences including an enormous hedge! Another group worked with Peter on the jumping lane and the canter track. My ride worked with Sam and I was keen to start getting in tune with the way Copper jumps as he tends to over jump and leave me behind the movement. Once we had warmed up by changing stride length over canter poles, we worked on 5 sets of poles set at a 45 degree angle down the middle of the school for over an hour. We focused on tight turns and maintaining a steady rhythmic pace and landing on the correct leg. During the lesson, Copper was very honest but did over jump or get underneath some of the fences. I was really pleased to receive, and test out, advice about my hand position, which needed to be further forward after take-off. When he has learned to adjust his stride length better his jumping should become smoother and less awkward.



After putting the horses to bed, we had an evening session judging dressage competitors using a DVD by FEI dressage judge, Stephen Clarke. It was very informative and caused lots of discussion about correct paces and using the scale of marks etc. We rounded the evening off with a few drinks at a local hostelry.

On Sunday morning, we swapped around our instructors and my ride went out onto the jumping field with Mark and Adam, for cross country practice. They proved to be very careful and diligent instructors and were not at all dictatorial. They understood the individual needs of the riders and horses and built my confidence with Copper. After warming up with cross poles, a small upright and small spread, we went on to do the coffin fence starting with just the ditch element and gradually building up the parts. By the time we jumped all 3 elements, Copper was jumping much better (perhaps because he had more to think about). We went on to jump an 'on and off' bank and a decent sized brush fence (where I was responsible for our only refusal due to a temporary loss of confidence). To finish off the morning session, we jumped all the fences again as a course of 7 fences with the option of a large 1m hedge to finish. Everyone, except the first horse, went clear and jumped the hedge to finish! I was so pleased with our progress.

The morning session had over run from 1 ½ hours to 2 hours so a decision was made not to ride in the afternoon. Instead, we had a final session about keeping fit for riding and planning to achieve our goals, interspersed with the usual banter between the instructors! By 3.30 pm we were wrestling with the army wheel barrows for the last time and making final sweeps to ensure the yard was left 'spick and span'.

The weekend proved to be an excellent way to start to get to know my new horse and to plan the training and development we will need in order to compete at riding club level. The atmosphere created by the instructors was very positive and their good humour made the whole weekend great fun!

Note: The photos of Copper were taken the day before before the camp weekend at the RRC show jumping clinic.