

Adult Dressage Camp 2007 by Susan Donohue

I saw the ad in the VADA/Nova newsletter for the Adult Dressage Camp. For a person who had never attended camp as a child, the idea was intriguing, tantalizing, and it grabbed hold of my imagination and wouldn't let go. I started calling all of my dressage friends and encouraging them to go with me. After everyone had checked their schedules and found out that they all had conflicts, I contacted Stephanie Floros who was one of the volunteers organizing the camp. She said that the camp was full, but just that morning there had been a scratch, so I sent in my application quickly and grabbed the vacant spot.

My non-horsey friends started kidding me about going off to camp, my kids gave me a hard time, my husband started telling his friends that I was off to rehab, which I think was an easier story than 'my wife is leaving me for five days to go ride her horse in a dressage camp.' I on the other hand, was thrilled. When I got my packing list, I cracked up...it was just like the packing lists I have received countless times for my kids' camps. Bring twin-size sheets, swimsuits, tennis rackets, change of clothes, toothbrush, etc. One thing was never on my kids' camp lists...bring your horse too!

After sending my children to visit their Grandparents for a week, I started packing, went and picked up my horse and thought I would be one of the first to arrive at camp. But, everyone else was as eager to get to camp as I was and we all arrived en masse as soon as the gates opened! With trailers and horses everywhere, it could have been confusing, but Susan and Bob Whitmire had everything organized. So, instead everyone started helping each other and it didn't take long to start making friends with people who were offering to help unload your hay and shavings and tack. How lovely! We all got our horses settled in their lovely accommodations at Madeira School. The stalls had already been cleaned and filled with fresh shavings. The staff at Madeira went out of their way to make our stay easy and fun. After the horses were taken care of, we drove to our dorms and unpacked our belongings. Each of us had a private room in a lovely, clean, air conditioned dorm. The air conditioning was very nice because it turned out to be one of the hottest weeks of the summer. Then we took showers and it was time for dinner. Dinner was catered and held in a private room at the Madeira dining hall. Each meal included huge bowls of freshly cut fruit, fresh pastas, beautiful crisp salads, and much, much more. It was delicious! Mary Callan, one of the campers, brought several bottles of wine and the party was on.

After dinner, we headed back to the stables, Mary turned her car stereo on to full-blast, and we walked our horses in the courtyard 'racehorse style.' The horses seemed to enjoy it as much as the campers. After a half-hour of walking, we tucked our horses in for the night and tried to head back to the dorms, but it turns out we had walked/danced/partied a little too long, as Mary's car battery was now dead. In the dark of night, she and I tried to jumpstart it, but neither of us could find our car's batteries, which was rather embarrassing. We decided a little sunlight might remedy the problem, and I gave her a ride back. At the dorms, a little more wine was opened (as if we needed it!) and we talked well into the night.

Early the next morning, we were back out at the stables getting our horses fed and clean. Susan Whitmire and Stephanie Floros were already there, getting everything ready for the day. In fact, they were there for every minute of every day of camp. Their dedication was unbelievable. It was obvious that many volunteers had worked for almost a year to put the camp together. I have never been part of a program that was better organized on so many different levels. Thank you so much to everyone who made it happen.

After a wonderful breakfast at the dining hall, we headed back to get our horses ready for their first lesson of the day. The two instructors were Jim Koford, grand prix rider of Art Deco, and Kathy Rowse, S Judge and also a student of Jim's. This is one of the reasons we think this camp/clinic was so successful. Since Kathy is not only a great rider and instructor in her own right, but she also follows Jim's methodology, everything that we learned during the camp fit together beautifully and worked to make each horse and rider a better team.

Prior to the camp, we provided Susan Trivers (a VADA/Nova volunteer), our riding goals and current level information. My first lesson was with Kathy. We reviewed my goals and difficulties and after some initial stretching, she tackled my first difficulty head-on. I have never been able to get good extensions, mediums, or heaven-forbid extended gaits on my horse. He doesn't even do them by himself out in the field! Kathy gave me a trick to put both of my shortened reins in one hand and the whip in the other. Then I was to send the horse on with the whip hand and half-halt with the reins hand whenever I felt him falling on the forehand. She was right that it was easier to feel the horse getting ready to go on the forehand when both reins were in one hand. After only a couple of minutes, my horse

was powering into beautiful medium gaits which I had never experienced before. After that, we worked a little on getting my horse ready to do flying changes. She taught me to feel how the movement would flow and we tried a couple of times, but my horse was still a little late behind.

After my ride, I was able to untack my horse and then cool him out by the outdoor ring while watching Kathy teach some other students. It was quite helpful to see the same techniques being used with great results on the other riders. It really reinforced the concepts nicely.

After a terrific lunch, I was off to my next lesson with Jim Koford. He also asked about my goals and difficulties. He had me start with some round and deep stretches to get my horse, Big Easy, to work over his back, free up his hind legs and to get him really stepping under himself. We did the stretching at all gaits for the entire lesson! I was exhausted and Big Easy was too. I knew that I had missed something because all of the other riders with Jim had not stretched the entire lesson. But the nice thing about this camp was that instead of being sent home confused, I was able to talk to the other campers and Jim and Kathy about it and learn what I was missing.

The evening session was watching Jim Koford teach Kathy Rowse. Kathy's horse is a Swedish Warmblood like mine, and like me she is working on third level. She is also working on flying changes, and her horse also likes to do them a little late. Jim started warming Kathy up, just like he did in my session, and then her horse became noticeably freer over his back and his hind legs started working like pistons, jumping up and forward. They were remarkable. When this happened, Jim had Kathy start to collect her horse, and that is when it hit me. My horse had never achieved the "piston leg status" and that was why we had continued stretching the whole session. It was a great light bulb moment for me. The rest of the lesson was a joy to watch. Kathy's horse moved beautifully. Her lateral work was fabulous, her changes were clean. The entire session was a thing of beauty...very precise, but allowing for whatever happened that day, but also with a clear progression.

After a good night's sleep (following a little more partying), I could not wait for my sessions the next day. I knew what we needed to work for and my horse knew it too, because he came out and stretched deeply with energy and soon we were up and collected and working on all of the fun movements, shoulder in, leg yield, half pass, renvers, travers, counter canter and simple and flying changes. I learned that my horse loves to go on his forehand and every couple of strides I needed a responsive half-halt to get him back up. I also learned that he wasn't responsive to my leg, seat, or rein (I had thought he was). After many transitions, he became light and easy. Wendy King videotaped the rides in the indoor ring and re-watching that lesson has been helpful. Thank you Wendy.

Jim rode Big Easy during part of my afternoon lesson on the second day, and I was surprised but very pleased to see that Big Easy's hind legs had the same piston-like movement that I was admiring on Kathy's horse the previous night. It gave me so much hope for my horse and myself.

After another night of fabulous meals, we met in the admissions hall overlooking the Potomac River for an evening discussion. Jim and Kathy talked about all kinds of topics including judging, riding, training, fitness (for horse and rider), mental attitude, etc. The Q&A session touched all aspects of dressage and lasted for hours. We all learned so much. One thing that really stuck with me is that Jim said that it was very important to enter the stable (or field) and look at your horse with all of the love and joy you feel because your horse will be scanning your body language and you will have much better sessions every day if you drop all of the worries and day's angst and greet your horse with love and affection (even if you are having such a bad day you need to fake it).

The next day was show day! Each of the riders had selected a test to ride, several of the riders were bumped *up* a level by Jim so that they could stretch themselves. The Madeira staff had cleaned and groomed the two outdoor rings so that Jim could warm the riders up in one ring and Kathy could judge them in the second ring. It was great to see so many of the riders, especially the ones who had been "bumped up" do such a great job and put in beautiful test after beautiful test. It was easy to see that all of us had improved by leaps and bounds. After Beth Morse's ride, she let me ride her FEI trained horse and to feel confirmed flying changes for the first time. It was yet, another light bulb moment for me. In turn, I let her ride Big Easy and she felt her first half-halt so we exchanged light bulbs.

In the afternoon session (half of the people had a private lesson with Jim and half a private lesson with Kathy); Beth was doing half-halts all over the place with her horse. I asked Jim if he would allow me to ride my test again and to have him work it through with me. Jim had me repeat and improve many, many movements during the first test. He

also provided me some trade secrets on how to improve my test and my scores. Then he had me go thru it again. And this time, it felt like a thing of beauty. It was the best ride I had ever had in my life. My horse was ultra responsive, light, forward, yet relaxed and fluid. It felt amazing. I still get goose bumps when I relive it.

That night VADA/Nova volunteer Kathy Curtis had an awards ceremony for the riders. Awards ranged from the Ronald Reagan Award (most right leaning horse and conservative rider) to Cutest Pair Award (horse and rider passed all 29 e-harmony points of compatibility). Prizes accompanied each award and they were gorgeous. Beautiful saddle pads, books, braiding kits, aprons, jackets, etc. Thank goodness, the campers had recognized all of the hard work the volunteers had put into the camp and we had 'escaped from camp' for an hour to head to the Saddlery in Great Falls to get some small gifts of appreciation for the volunteers.

Each day brought so many special riding moments, so many laughs, so many good jokes (some I cannot tell my family!), so many new friends, so many friendly auditors, some very good wine, and such a deep appreciation for the time and effort Jim and Kathy put into our education, as well as a new appreciation for VADA/Nova and the depth of the volunteer force and the commitment they had to bring off this event with such style.

I have told all of my friends about the camp and after glowing for days and seeing the improvement in my horse and my riding, they are clamoring to go to the next one. I know that when the call goes out for volunteers to prepare for the next camp, there will be a whole new set of volunteers ready to help make it happen. Here's to Adult Dressage Camp 2008!