

Stifle injury sidelines one candidate, but a “pocket rocket” steps into his shoes on journey from “misfits to real dressage horses.”

by Emily Flaxman

The competition draws closer and that's forced me to make a tough decision. Louie is not improving at a rate that would lead me to be optimistic about taking him to Kentucky for the Thoroughbred Makeover in October.



I had a vet give him a quick look over and the opinion was that he has a stifle injury. Without a full lameness examination, it's hard to know what he has done or how bad it is. But given that the stifle is such a complicated joint, I would want to plan on three to six months of rehab time.

Having a competition looming over our heads may lead to wrong decisions. So I have decided to leave Louie to chill in the pasture and take all the time he needs. So, no Kentucky for him.

I started to look around for a replacement, and at the same time got in touch with one of my OTTB's previous owners. The horse Danz With KJ has been with me since just before last year's Makeover. He is the full brother to my 2015 Makeover horse, Go Wheeler Go.

After he finished racing, KJ's owners tried him as a pony horse - an older racehorse who accompanies the youngsters on their first outings. Apparently he hated it! I had assumed this made him ineligible for the Makeover, but on further investigation, it turns out that he had only done the pony job for two days. I guess he really did hate it!!

Because I gave him let-down time when he came to me, and he also managed to tread on a nail in pasture, which meant he got December off, KJ hadn't had more than the 15 allowable training rides that Retired Racehorse Project accepts. (RRP sponsors the Makeover.) So he is fully eligible!

KJ is a pocket rocket, standing at a tiny 15.2hh. He is so similar to his brother, both in looks and personality. Like all of my horses, he does a lot of trail riding up and down Mt. Diablo to build up his topline and to leg him up.

He is still fairly new to arena work but has caught on pretty quickly and seems to naturally want to use his back. Like most TBs, he is built slightly on the forehand and, thanks to his racing career, he has a very well developed under neck. I think his trot is better than his brother's because he has more hock action, but it will still need to be developed more to be competitive.

“Interesting” Canter

The first few canters I had on him were....interesting. He would brace, grab the bit and do this weird four-beat hybrid gait thing. A combination of transitions and long canters have shown him that it is indeed possible to do something resembling a canter inside of a tiny sandbox.

Because it has no fence around it, my arena is not ideally designed for first canters on recently retired racehorses. The only boundary is an eight-inch high railway tie, which isn't much of an incentive for most horses to turn. The last few times I've schooled him we actually got a semi-decent canter both ways even if our transitions to get there weren't pretty.

Walk and trot are also both improving, with more consistency of his head carriage and connection. He still braces in the jaw when he loses balance, but he is slowly learning to let me help him and soften to the aids.

Meanwhile, my other Makeover candidate, Merlin, has been doing even more trail riding with a few sessions each week in the arena. Mostly at walk and trot, focusing on transitions - both between gaits and within the gaits.

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Friday, 01 July 2016 02:28

He is much softer in his topline already than KJ. He allows me to soften his jaw and flex him in the poll. Although we have wobbles in the transitions sometimes, he doesn't tend to fix against the bit as much. Both boys have learned to leg yield because I believe it is a valuable tool in loosening up the loins and gaining access to the hindquarters.



They are also learning baby shoulder-in at the walk and shoulder-fore at trot. I keep it short and simple at first: into the movement for three or four strides and then straighten so they never feel stuck. I also alternate between shoulder fore left and right, regardless of the direction I'm travelling around the arena. So I might ride up the three-quarter line, start shoulder-fore to the inside, travel a few steps straight and then shoulder-fore to the outside.

Utilizing shoulder-fore in the upward transitions will help teach them to step under and push up rather than forward.

I find that most horses tend to get tight and a little hard in the hindquarters when they first start to canter properly. To keep an eye on this, my spoilt ponies get massaged every three weeks. If the muscles get too hard, then you are risking injury and therefore a delay in training. So there is a fine balance between developing strength and overdoing it. I often give them massages with the currycomb in the triangle between the hip, buttock and stifle.

This is where the canter muscles tend to get tightest. I also just purchased a Rambo massage blanket, which I'm excited to try out on everybody.

Next month, will be focusing on building strength, suppleness and consistency in both the boys. I'll also start riding through tests to see where our holes are. I'd like to get transitions cleaner to the point where I can ride them at a marker. There's a schooling show in August that I have my eye on, for a little competition experience, but time will tell if they are ready.

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All my horses got a week off this month as I took a trip back to the motherland (England) to catch up with friends and family. While I was there I squeezed in a lesson on a Grand Prix schoolmaster. It was amazing!

I got to play with piaffe, passage, pirouettes and tempi changes. It's so good for you as a rider to get on advanced horses occasionally to refresh in your mind and body the feeling you are striving towards. The break and the lesson were great for me as I came back to the ranch ready to crack on and full of motivation to turn my bunch of misfits into real dressage horses.

If you have never had the chance to ride a fully-trained dressage horse I highly recommend you seek out a lesson on one. There is nothing quite like the feeling of all that controlled power. You could almost say it's addictive!