

Final preparations for KJ for this month's big event.

by Emily Flaxman

Another month that didn't go to plan. Sadly, the show I intended to go to got cancelled at the last minute, which was unfortunate but luckily another local showground announced that they were going to host a show in September so we've entered for that instead. This will definitely be our last opportunity before Kentucky though as the show season is winding down for the winter. We're into the final straight now, with only seven weeks to go until the Oct. 27-30 Thoroughbred Makeover as I write this.

So it really is down to solidifying what we are already good at and working out the kinks of all the things we're not so good at. Currently the second list feels like the longer one. I'm trying not to panic, I know I wouldn't feel ready even if I had another six months left, and I don't want to push KJ too hard and risk injury or putting him off his job.

Right now he seems to really enjoy the challenge of learning to use his body properly. The trouble is he has a comfort zone where he works beautifully, but if you change that at all then it falls apart. So transitions, changes of bend, a half halt and lateral work all challenge where he is comfortable and happy and he pings his head up or braces in the neck. It's not enough to be a big problem but it would be noticeable to a judge and it is noticeable to me as a rider.

It all comes down to acceptance of the aids, which, to be fair, he was not expected to do in his previous life. So it's about explaining to him, firmly but fairly, that in this new world he has to allow me into his body so I can help him out. A lot of our schooling involves simple exercises like serpentines, figure-8s, half-circle to reverse and bending lines, just focusing on keeping the

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consistency in the contact as we change directions. We also play around a lot with transitions within the paces, a little more impulsion, then collect, then move on again.

There are moments in the trot when we do this that I feel him really lift up through the shoulder and drive from behind and I see glimpses of an ability for medium trot in his future.

Another fun exercise we do to test his acceptance of the aids is the turn on the forehand. We keep it quite forward, to prevent him getting sticky and going behind the aids again. But it tests that the horse yields to the inside leg, bends around it, and accepts the outside rein. The first time we tried it, it was immediately obvious that he was not accepting the outside half halt in the slightest, but the more we practice the better it is getting... funny how that works, huh?

No Halt...Yet.

We still can't halt though, and given that halting occurs at least twice -- in every test, at every level -- I feel that is something quite important to work on. Because he braces into the bit when I try to halt, my trainer has me think of leg yield positioning during and even into the halt and we keep him moving very slowly, one leg at a time, until he relaxes his jaw and comes into a submissive halt. I have a feeling that this is something we are going to be working on up to Kentucky and beyond.

The canter is getting a lot better and for the most part has lost its rushed rhythm and become a lot clearer with a slight hint of a moment of suspension between strides. We work on spiraling a circle in until he finds it a little harder, and at that point, half halt to sit him on the hind legs a little more for a couple of strides before expanding the circle back out whilst thinking of making the stride bigger, not faster.

We have also started introducing very shallow loops of counter canter. To begin, we break it down into three straight lines: a diagonal line for a few strides, then straighten and ride parallel to the rail, then diagonally back to the rail before the corner. It's usually when you go to ride them straight or as you turn them back to the rail that you feel the loss of balance and where a quick half halt and a supporting outside rein will teach them to stay upright and balance on the outside hind leg.

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Apparently counter canter is a good indication of the ability to take weight behind and to collect. So I would like to show it in our freestyle. After we show, we get three minutes in the arena to show of our horse's training.

Also this week I taught KJ a new trick - walk to canter! He's so clever he got it first time, we did four each way and only one of them he added trot steps into. I'm hoping these transitions will help him learn to sit and push in the trot to canter.

Interestingly enough, I just visited the competition's webpage to clarify the wording and they have removed the bit about "showing ability to progress up the levels."

They now say: "Immediately after the final salute of Training Level Test 2, each rider will be allowed three minutes to perform whatever movements he or she believes best demonstrate the horse's training progress within the United States Dressage Federation (USDF) Training Pyramid. Note that judges will penalize efforts to perform movements beyond a horse's level of training and development."

So I will have to have a careful think about what to include in my freestyle to make sure it fits within these new guidelines. I'm not sure what movements they will feel are beyond a horse's level at this stage in training so it will be a fine line of showing off what an amazingly talented boy he is and not going too far.

Cosmetic Concerns

I'm also starting to think of more frivolous details in our preparation. I'm a bit of a Dressage Queen (aka Diva), so I like my horses to be in show condition when I take them out. KJ is in wonderful condition, or fat, thanks to his healthy appetite so that is good - especially since travel can cause them to drop a little weight.

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