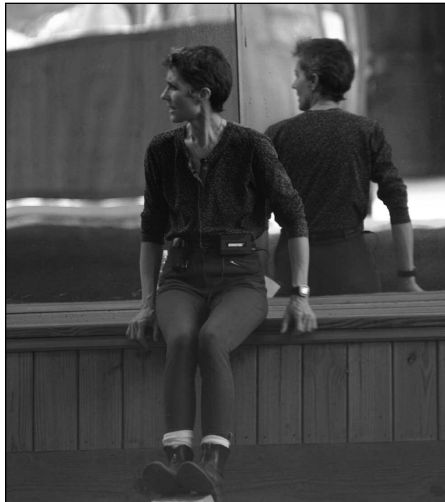


SEDA Adult Scholarship Yields Positive Results

By Nicole Landreneau



Let me begin by saying ‘thank you’ to SEDA for offering this scholarship opportunity to its members. I consider myself very fortunate to have been chosen as a recipient, and I was very eager to put it to good use!

I chose to use my scholarship to attend the Loma Fowler clinic in September.

Admittedly, I was rather nervous. My previous clinic experience left me feeling hopelessly unqualified to ride a horse, much less attempt to master anything dressage, so I was rather apprehensive. Having observed other Loma Fowler clinics offered by SEDA, I knew this experience would be different, but that did little to calm the butterflies. (It’s that whole lack of confidence thing I perpetually struggle with, I suppose.)

The first few minutes in the arena were rather humorous. It had been ages since my horse, Shalom, had been in a covered arena, and he’d never encountered mirrors before, so I really wasn’t sure what his reaction would be: he’d be either ‘ho-hum’ or ‘totally terrified’. Fortunately, it was somewhere in between. Once he grew accustomed to the layout of the arena at Stirling, and the fact

that people were sitting ‘above’ him, I introduced him to the mirrors. He was fascinated and had to repeatedly snuffle noses with that handsome horse he couldn’t quite reach. At that point, it was time to get down to business.

Our first ride was a private session with Loma, and I found her both kind and patient. She asked about our history, some of our issues and some of our goals. My trainer, Leslie Morris, was there, too, so she could fill Loma in on some of the problem areas we’ve been trying to address at home.

After watching us trot around for a few minutes, the first thing Loma wanted us to ‘fix’ was my leg position. I needed more ‘weight’ in my knees – this is something I’ve always struggled with, as, during the course of a ride, my knees slowly creep up toward my lap. Next, I needed to relax my shoulders and put more weight in my elbows, but leave the forearm supple and relaxed. This allows for more steady but ‘moveable’ contact with the horse. Essentially, you shouldn’t be locking your arms and holding the horse in frame, but you want to maintain a steady contact to offer support and correction when necessary.

Of course, using your core is key to control and moving correctly with the horse; and using your weight in the proper way helps you to motivate and control the horse with less pulling and ‘muscling’ the animal around. She suggested that using the muscles in the front part of your hip and upper leg helps you use your weight to maintain control rather than just your hand. It all makes perfect sense, but the execution is another matter entirely!

Once Loma had me busy concentrating on legs, hands and core, we addressed some

of the issues with Shalom. He tends to get strung out and I have difficulty keeping him in a proper frame. This, of course, affects everything we do. To help me understand what we needed to fix, Loma had me close my eyes and put my hand out to indicate where it felt like his shoulders were as we moved. When I opened my eyes, my hand was pointed well in front of me and the saddle. This is a problem! The shoulders should be under me, not waaay out in front.

To alleviate this, Loma had me use a very strong half-halt and then immediate release every couple of strides. This almost immediately caused Shalom pick his shoulder up, resulting in a straighter and more uphill horse. The difference was amazing. We continued to work on other movements using this technique to keep Shalom’s shoulders up throughout, and it wound up being a very successful ride.

The next day, I shared a lesson with Joe Gallion. Loma had me continue with some of the same things from the previous day, and amazingly, Shalom was spot on. In fact, I thought for certain someone had swapped horses with me during the night – he was that different! It was a great feeling to have a more responsive horse, especially at the canter where he tends to get really heavy and then run off with me.

To help with that ‘run away’ problem, Loma had me do a series of turns on the forehand, which again forced Shalom to pick up his shoulders and back off my hands. She suggested doing this movement whenever he gets unresponsive or runs through my aids, and then pick up where we left off for at least a few strides. This will help us leave off on a positive note, and will also help Shalom to realize that it is easier to respond correctly right away rather than be made to work harder for longer at another gait. Using his laziness to my advantage!

Since Shalom responded so well to the aids I was using, the next thing Loma had me do was push him to extend his gait and then come back to me. In fact, she said he

was so well 'in the box' now, that he was 'boring' and needed 'more expression in his gaits'. This was achieved by me releasing and allowing him to move out more freely, and then bringing him back with the strong half-halt. We did this first on a circle and then on a straight path. I'm happy to say that we had several strides of an honest-to-goodness extended canter! Wow! I never thought that would be possible!

We also did some work on the shoulder-in. What a treat to do this in front of mirrors - I could actually see what we look like and have a visual on what we are doing wrong. What a concept! Loma stressed that at least for right now, the depth of the angle at the shoulder-in is less important than the straightness of the shoulder through the movement. Everything seems to come back to keeping his shoulder up with that strong half-halt every few strides.

I'm not going to say that the strong half-halt is an 'easy fix' to all of our problems - I finished the weekend feeling like I should be Arnold Schwarzenegger. (Shalom is rather strong at times, especially when he gets tired). I've been assured, though, that lightness will come as he continues to develop the muscles necessary for self-carriage ... so we will continue working on keeping his shoulder up and look forward to those moments of lightness!

In addition to all that I learned during my own sessions, I had the pleasure of watching others ride. I seldom have the opportunity to sit and watch other riders, so, what a revelation it was that other people have some of the same issues I do!

It was interesting to watch other riders do some of the same things I know I do: uneven shoulders; contorting your own body in mimicking the position you want the horse to be; twisting your body to compensate for the imbalance of the horse.

There are 'fixes' for all of these things, and I picked up a few more hints from what Loma told other riders. In fact, something simple like concentrating on spreading your toes will help to drop your leg into the proper position. Who knew?!

Another interesting comment Loma made to someone was to not 'hold the bit in your lap.' The bit is in the horse's mouth so you need fluid, moveable flexion in the mouth which is achieved with fluid, moveable flexion in your arms. I know I've been guilty of the death grip on the bit, literally holding it in my lap with my hands ... and that doesn't solve anything. The horse's jaw locks to match your locked elbows and you have a pulling contest. So, remembering to keep weight in your elbows - like someone tied a bag of sand to your elbow - but your forearm flexible will help maintain proper contact with the horse. There's so much to remember!

The end of my experience came all too soon, but I can certainly say that this was a positive experience for both Shalom and I. We both learned a lot, and it was fun, too! I am most grateful to SEDA for awarding me this opportunity, and I strongly encourage all of our members to apply for the scholarship. There is SO much to be learned and everyone can benefit from another point of view. ♣

*“A horse can lend its rider the speed
and strength he or she lacks - but the
rider who is wise remembers
that it is no more than a loan.”*

-PAM BROWN