

Week-long report by Ruth Dickens, England

Firstly I want to say thank you for the week that I spent with you in Loveland, and to tell you that I still am not wholly aware of all of the things that I have learned.

When I first arrived home I could not even think what to say to people who asked what we had done. After a week teaching back at home however I have found that I have accessed more than was just presented on the course. For example in trying to teach two novice riders (only 7 weeks riding experience in total) I did an exercise in the tack room where I took hold of one end of the reins and them the other, and asked them to take up their normal contact. I have done this many times before to give an indication of how light a contact is possible. On this occasion however I was truly shocked at the tight, dead, heavy feel that I felt, and even when they lightened their contact I could still feel braces that were not pleasant. I have not felt this in this way before.

Through the reins I was not fully able to help them distinguish the difference between lightness and softness as tension was still there, and so we went onto the exercise where we stand palm to palm, moving with each other until they too were soft. They were then worried that they were only pulling so hard, they said in response to the horses pulling on them first! We went back to the reins and I had them be a hard pulling horse, first with me braced, and they could pull pretty hard. Then I asked them to repeat the exercise with me centered and soft and they could not pull at all. They just kind of gave up even when I was verbally telling them "come on- pull!".

They were then worried that they would not be strong enough to control a horse without the pulling and tense muscles so we did the exercises you showed us for blending, sitting, standing, kneeling etc. Not only were they impressed, but other people on the yard joined in and were trying the exercises too. Small steps add up, and I had not realized how much more feel, understanding and confidence I had achieved when I was with you. To adapt exercises that you gave and to go on to rein feel has been a big step, as though I am thinking further rather than just reproducing the same exercises that we were shown (although I am sure you have done this many times before- just not in front of me!).

I have since started other lessons with students holding one end of reins and me the other so we can feel braces within each other. The horses are certainly appreciating the difference this is making once mounted and many riders are saying that they had not realized how little force they would have to use to control a horse. The horses are moving freer, in a naturally rounded outline.

The best thing is that such a small part of what I have learned and become aware of has had such a big impact on so many so soon! There is still so much to come from the experience. I will be back next year, and look forward to the 2 day clinic in November.

Finally I wish again to thank Mark and Kathleen for taking the course, especially the time Kathleen took to talk through some home issues with me, to Dave for making me feel so welcome and safe, and for slowing me down enough that I had a chance to take in what was being offered, to Shihan Eric Adams for welcoming us to the Dojo, to Sensi Joel York for sharing his enthusiasm with us, to all of the group members for sharing their experiences and journeys and finally to Poco the little horse who trained me hard for four days.