

Weeklong Clinic Report

by Tessa Pagonis

For anyone who hasn't been to a weeklong clinic, the format is a lot different than the 2 or 4-day clinics on the road. At a weeklong, you have at least 5 to 6 hours a day when you can be horseback or otherwise working with your horse, and everyone is working their horses during those same times, so you don't spend so much time watching other riders. So instead of a "here's who was there with what kind of horse and this is what they worked on" reporting format, I'm going to have to go with my own experience, which is probably all I could accurately report on in any case!

The resources available at the week-long are amazing. There's Mark, of course, and Mark's assistant Kathleen, who is as terrific as you'd expect. Dave Siemens (Dr. Dave), who is a horse and human chiropractor is there. He does saddle fitting as well as chiropractic adjustments for you and/or your horse. In addition to everyone being really good at what they do, they are all wonderful people; fascinating to talk to, people with really good hearts who are more than willing to share their knowledge and experience with anyone who wants to learn. The other clinic participants are great resources as well. The more I talked to the other riders about their horses, or their horse or life experiences, the more I learned.

You truly do get out of one of these clinics what you put into it. And you have to take complete responsibility for your experience. You can ride as much or as little as you want. You can watch other riders and learn from what they are doing. You can ask questions or not. Your level of participation is completely up to you. If you want someone's help, you go out and get it. You decide what kind of help you need and from whom, and then you ask for it - and get it, which was kind of a revelation for me. Asking for help is one of my least favorite things to do, but I had to do it (a lot) during that week and I was really glad I did.

One really important part of the clinics is that every morning you say (to all the participants) what your goals are for the day, and every evening you say what you learned that day and what your goals are for the next day. I came to realize this is a really important part of not only my horsemanship but of my life in general. Setting goals, being willing to say them out loud, talking about what you learn, noticing if it's the same or different from your original goal, and planning the next set of goals is a really powerful exercise.

I took Tabby to the clinic. She's a 5-year-old Arab who I just started getting on this year (I've had her since she was 11 months old and she's been very slow to mature physically). We arrived with about 6 rides under her belt. On the first day we worked on leading without me getting run over. By the last day, we were out pushing cows through an obstacle course, opening and closing gates while mounted, going over the various obstacles on the horse playground (the teeter totter bridge was a favorite), standing

quietly with Kathleen and Ashcroft and Mark and Mouse watching other riders, and just generally learning to be quiet and soft under saddle. As Kathleen said on Tabby's behalf, "I left Maryland a filly and I came back a mare."

I kept a journal while I was there and each day there was something I wrote that summed up the day for me:

Day 1:

My horse work today was an exercise in learning, patience, humility and open mindedness, not to mention the importance of asking for (and allowing) help.

Day 2:

I get very frustrated when I don't understand the rules, which gave me empathy for the horse.

Goals for tomorrow:

1. Tune out other people and external distractions; focus on my horse
2. Offer myself the same level of patience I'm willing to offer my horse

Day 3:

Mark keeps reiterating with me that if I can just keep adding one more link to the chain of what my horse knows, she'll keep having more tools to draw in so she can begin to settle herself. I need to be soft and consistent and every time I want to say "No," I need to give her another option instead. Better to respond to an idea of hers with, "How about if we do this instead..." rather than with "Don't do that!"

Something to work on: I am always aware of everything that might distract my horse. I think of that as a positive but now I'm not so sure. If I'm focused on my horse and truly WITH her, I'll be prepared for anything that might happen even if I don't see it coming first and try to anticipate it.

Day 4:

MUCH better about staying focused and not worrying about Tabby's friend Punkin when there was something interesting to do and look at. (WHO got better at this?!)

Day 5:

Wow! Tabby's grown up before our very eyes. She felt 5 years more mature! I think pushing the cows without her friend Punkin was a real confidence builder. We were opening and closing gates, going out to the playground and over the bridge and the poles, standing for 10 minutes or more with Kathleen and Mark (and Ashcroft and Mouse) watching other riders. She was really mellow and steady.

Follow Up & What I Learned

Our homework one night was to think of something we've learned this week and how it applies to something other than horsemanship. Which I thought was funny because I feel like everything I'm learning applies to everything and not just horsemanship. Some examples:

1. Hyper vigilance usually causes more problems than it solves
2. If I'm accusing someone else of a particular behavior there's a good chance it's MY behavior, or at least that I started it.
3. It's very important to have a plan and follow through on it when performing a task
4. It's also important to be flexible if your plan includes goals that aren't realistic yet
5. It's okay, even preferable, to move slowly and take tasks in small steps, making sure each step is fully established/completed before moving on to the next step
6. Listening and waiting till the other person is finished is very important (in horsemanship this applies to asking and then waiting for the response; e.g. when I ask for softness I've been way too busy throwing more cues at the horse if I think the response I get isn't quick enough)
7. You learn a lot more and get to your goal a lot quicker if you look for and notice the little things. If you always expect big, you miss a lot.
8. Consistency, consistency, consistency
9. It's very important to recognize when you need help, to ask for it, and to allow yourself to receive it
10. You never know if something will work until you try it, and while you're trying it, you can't also debate it, you just have to do it
11. Be clear in your teaching so that at the end of a lesson, the student knows what it is they've been taught
12. When teaching, always give feedback: not enough guidance can lead to the student (horse) taking matters into their own hands
13. When you have something to work on, it's really easy to forget the task when something else comes into play. Keep remembering the point of any exercise you set for yourself or your horse
14. Feel can get a lot less soft when there's a specific task to do. Don't lose the feel just because you have a new goal
15. LOOK FOR OTHER OPTIONS. This applies to everything. It's easy to be literal and not very creative and to get stuck in what you can't do instead of trying something else.
16. You can't do one thing in most areas of your life and expect to be able to do it differently in one area of your life. Three days in the truck on the way home was a long time to think and practice some things. I fidget A LOT, and I constantly fidget myself into unbalanced or tense positions. I let my mind wander, and when it does, my body starts wandering too (from simply tensing muscles to crossing my legs, or propping my elbows up on something, etc), and I'm not even aware of it. How can I possibly be balanced and soft and quiet and focused with my horses if I'm so unbalanced and fidgety and tense and distracted the rest of the time? Keeping an awareness of where my center is and where my balance is drives out a lot of the extraneous noise in my head. I just can't think about that many things at once. I think (I hope) that paying attention to this may be habit forming.
17. I can decide on a new rule (behavior) at any time as long as I'm clear and consistent about it. I don't need to get stuck in what I've always done or how I've always been and feel obligated to stay that way because someone else expects it