

The Dressage Foundation 2009 Gifted Grant
Maggie Stonecipher & Gabel
Training with Laurie Hedlund
October 19, 2009 – October 23, 2009
Knightmare Farms, Chelsea OK

My original training plan was to travel to California to work with Sue Halasz as well as tagging on several days with Steffen Peters. Unfortunately Gabel had a bout of cellulites in May 2009 that led to my vets advising that a multi-day haul for Gabel may be a risk. Gabel is my dream horse and the decision to change my training plan was easy to make. The Dressage Foundation graciously allowed me to submit a revised training plan to work with Laurie Hedlund. Laurie is an USDF "L" graduate with distinction, an USDF Certified Instructor through 2nd Level as well as an USDF Bronze and Silver Medalist. An 18 year student of dressage master Alf Athenstaedt, Laurie has a wonderful, patient yet demanding style based in the roots of classical dressage.

I have had the pleasure of working with Laurie for over 4 years having traveled from my home in Bonner Springs, KS to work with Laurie in OK many times as well as having Laurie in for clinics at my farm.

My primary partner for the week of training is Gabel, my 1994 OLD/NA gelding that I purchased in July 2007. Gabel had shown through PSG while I had only shown through 3rd Level. We earned our Silver Medal in 2008 as our partnership has grown by leaps and bounds. In 2009 we have been showing at Intermediare 1.

The areas I hope to develop and improve during our training are:

- 🍏 Throughness – Gabel needs to continue to truly reach more through the back and build more topline in order to advance in his FEI level development. I need to learn how to improve and refine my aids to help him consistently achieve this throughness.
- 🍏 Collection – continue to build within the training scale progressing to greater strength and collection. We are now schooling piaffe and passage where this strength is even more critical.
- 🍏 Seat and Balance – I still tend to lock my hips in the sitting trot and I must learn to let go and follow the movement of the horse. Gabel has so much more trot to offer if I can develop a suppler seat.
- 🍏 Tempis – refine my timing and aids to allow more flow in the tempis.
- 🍏 Better understanding of riding upper level tests.

My expectations from working with Laurie are:

- 🍏 Over the past two years Laurie has been able to see Gabel and I progress from 3rd level to I-1. She has worked with us several times and also coached me at a show when my trainer, Amy, could not attend. She knows from where we have come and has the knowledge to help us move towards our ultimate goals.
- 🍏 To continue my journey focusing on correct classical riding skills. Amy and Laurie balance each other nicely with their respective strengths. Laurie and Amy both challenge me each and every ride to focus on the fundamentals of the aids, not the 'tricks'.
- 🍏 To solidify skills to excel at showing Gable FEI. Showing upper level is an art and a talent with many intricacies and detail in each movement.

- 🍏 To continue to build my partnership with Gabel. Trust and confidence is essential to a strong team and it grows constantly; it is never stagnant.
- 🍏 To immerse myself in learning from Laurie over an extended period of time – watching her ride, her lessons, understanding why she asks me the things she does.

I headed down to Oklahoma on Friday, October 16th to get in one final show of the year with Gabel in order to gain more ring experience at Intermediare I. While Amy went with me, Laurie was also at the show coaching several of her students. Laurie was able to watch my warm-up and rides both days giving her a look at how we are progressing in the show ring. I also brought my 1995 ATA/AHA gelding, Klass Act, while my good friend, Mary Beth Rourke, and her mare, Fiona, also joined us for our journey.

After the show on Sunday, we headed over to Jennie Waggoner-Gossett's Nightmare Farm. Jennie greeted us warmly and gave us a tour of her lovely farm. Mary Beth and I stayed in a guest apartment where Jennie had fresh baked chocolate chip cookies waiting for us! We settled in while giving the horses some time out on green pastures before everyone turning in early for a good night's rest. But not before Mary Beth made friends with Skippy.....



On Monday morning, Mary Beth and I met Laurie at Woodridge Farm to watch her school her young gelding, Fanfare. We all returned to Nightmare Farms where I had my first session on Gabel. Laurie's first question was had I read the Lisa Wilcox article on Achieving Throughness in the October Dressage Today. I had the magazine at home but had not read it yet. Laurie said she told all her students it was required reading as the article was the core to all that we do in dressage. And it would be the basis for much of my work with Laurie this week. To quote Lisa's article "throughness is the most essential quality in dressage training." "When your horse is 'through', he is supple both laterally and longitudinally. Energy moves through his entire body with no blocks, so the entire topline swings without tension."

Laurie wanted to start with improving Gabel's lateral suppleness by working spiral in/spiral out exercises at all three gaits. We worked through the exercises in both true flex and counter flex while keeping Gabel quick to the aids and the inside hind leg active. Then Laurie

had me work on longitudinal suppleness by doing transitions within the spiral in/spiral out exercise.

We followed this with working both the trot and canter in a 'baby' shoulder-in on the quarter line. We worked the first half of the quarter line in shoulder-in and then the second half moving into shoulder-fore - closing up the hind legs by bringing in the outside leg thus narrowing the base of the hind legs. From Beth Baumert's Dressage Today October 2009 article, "the horse in shoulder-fore steps with his inside hind leg between the tracks of the forelegs, while his outside hind leg follows in the track of the outside foreleg." This classical exercise really helped me to feel each hind leg and how I could influence each to create more straightness and power from behind by narrowing the base. After I successfully negotiated this exercise we then added the pirouette canter to the middle of each line. While I have used shoulder-fore in the past, I gained an understanding that I was really using more of a 'baby' shoulder-in; hence why Laurie wanted to start our week off with very clearly making sure I understood and could execute the difference. The uphill self-carriage and power was incredible and gave me a new feeling of how I can influence both hind legs. Lisa states in her article that "my horses and I live in shoulder-fore, where all transitions are done." That is my new mantra!

I then took a lunge lesson on Klass in order to work on my position and sitting trot work. Gabel has a very tough trot to sit so bringing Klass along for my week of training will help me to improve my position and aids. Klass has not been a lunge lesson horse in the past but did a great job with this role. Laurie helped us to focus on our body alignment in the transitions as well as working to improve my feel for influencing Klass' hind legs to improve the cadence of the trot. I have soft tissue damage in my right hip from a nasty riding accident so it is a challenge to keep my hips swinging. Laurie emphasized using my core and body alignment strong while keeping my hips soft and swinging. Whew....lots of stomach muscle burn but we had some much improved sitting trot by the end of the lesson.



Laurie warming up Klass prior to our lesson

Tuesday started very leisurely with both boys enjoying several hours out in lovely green pastures. The warm, sunny morning was a treat and the boys galloped and rolled but mostly grazed.



We started our work with Laurie by watching her give lessons to a client with two young horses. I then took another lunge lesson on Klass so that I could take the position work into my rides on Gabel. Laurie first worked with my position by utilizing arm exercises to help me stretch tall and keeping my body straight in the sitting trot. Raising my arms straight over my head and then rotating them down with the back of my hands against the small of my back helped me to sit tall and then bring my shoulders back all while keeping my core strong.

Wow....a wonderful exercise that repositioned my whole upper body. Laurie then had me keep the body alignment and pick up the reins emphasizing that my elbows must be at my side to work with my core. Some final adjustment to pulling my head back onto my shoulders helped complete the exercise. We then worked on riding transitions so that I did not tip forward but rather maintained my new body alignment. From there we finished up the lesson by using just my seat to lengthen and shorten the trot. Great lesson....I get so busy with working full-time at my 'real' job, owning a stable, riding my horses, etc. that I am always rushing. Taking time to get back to basics is a key learning I must take back in incorporate into my regular routine.

After a quick changeover, it was Gabel's turn to pick up from the work we started yesterday. After some warm-up at the walk ensuring Gabel was responsive to my leg and seat, we went to the canter work picking up with the 'baby' shoulder-in on the quarter line then moving into shoulder-fore. We were much quicker today at influencing both hind legs allowing us to move into using this exercise to improve Gabel's half-passes. Gabel's half-passes are weak in that he is slow to the aids and immediately hollows....might that be he loses throughness in this exercise? I think so!

Laurie had us come down the centerline in a slight shoulder-in, then into shoulder-fore before asking for the half pass. We then went into our half pass keeping the thought of closing the outside hind leg to maintain the shoulder-fore. After a few strides of half-pass we went back into shoulder-fore then asking Gabel to leg yield to the opposite direction of the half-pass. This exercise required both Gabel and I to react more quickly – me to giving the aids more rapidly and accurately and Gabel to reacting more quickly to each aid. We were successful in the first part of the exercise and vastly improved the half pass strides but Gabel had difficulty with the shoulder-fore to leg yield part of the exercise. After several tries we began to get it and complete the exercise. Changing directions saw immediately improved half-pass work and when I remembered not to look down in the leg yield we were able to successfully complete the exercise.

Creating more power and drive behind the saddle is a key goal of the exercises Laurie is using with Gabel in order to improve our throughness, collection and straightness as we progress through the FEI levels.

We woke Wednesday refreshed after a great night's rest and got moving for an early start. Laurie started me off again with a lunge lesson on Klass. Klass has been a rock star in his new role as lunge lesson horse. We continued working on my position incorporating more arm exercises and yikes.....working with my eyes closed so I could better feel my body. With my eyes closed, Laurie had me lean forward, then tip backwards and then bring my body to what I thought was straight. We did this first at the walk and then at the trot. Laurie also incorporated improving my lower leg position. I tend to try to push my heel down too much so Laurie had me bring my heel up to a more level position so that my calf could more gently hug Klass' rib cage. We ended the lesson by picking up on the exercise from yesterday where we worked on influencing the trot with just my seat. I was better today at lengthening Klass' trot and then bring it back. By the end of the lesson my abs were burning!

My lesson with Gabel was a major treat! Laurie wanted to work Gabel in-hand. After showing over the weekend and then two days of intense work activating his hind, Laurie wanted to change the type of work we did today. We started with Gabel on the lunge. Laurie

explained that she prefers to use the Spanish Canvesson over the German Canvesson. There are 2 ways to adjust the canvesson.....over the bit is the way The Spanish Riding School of Vienna adjusts the canvesson or putting the canvesson up high above the bit where the nose band would go is the way the German school likes to adjust it. It also depends on the horse where you adjust it. So, it is just a preference. Laurie lunged Gabel to loosen him up and get him stretching over his back before adding the side reins. She then used transitions to activate his hind. Laurie gave me several tips & exercises for using the lunge as part of our regular schooling.



Gabel modeling the Spanish Canvesson

Laurie then introduced me to classical long lining. Since I did not know if or how much Gabel has been long lined, Laurie started slowly and carefully. Laurie showed me my role keeping Gabel straight and on the rail. I had a short lead attached to the Canvesson and used a long piaffe whip along Gabel's side to keep his hind from coming in. Laurie managed the long lines and it was quickly apparent that Gabel was versed in long lining. Gabel tends to disconnect in his transitions into and out of the piaffe. Laurie used transitions within the trot to get Gabel more responsive and quick to the aids. After each trot series, we halted to give Gabel lots of praise, reassurance and sugar. Laurie then used the exercise to ask Gabel to come into several quality steps of piaffe and then quality steps out of piaffe. By the end of the session, Gabel was able to better connect the trot transitions into and out of a few steps

of lovely piaffe. The lesson was intense and quite a workout for all of us! After two great lessons, the boys went out to enjoy some pasture time.



As I videotaped Mary Beth's lesson I was hit with the true value and intent of the Gifted Grant. Getting away from the stresses and strains of my normal life to focus just on myself and my horses is truly a gift that enveloped me in that moment. I realized how relaxed I was and how much I was enjoying the week. Being in Chelsea, OK also meant internet was very limited. My broadband card even struggled with keeping a connection so I spent very little time checking up on work and personal. This was an unexpected benefit and if you had told me I wouldn't look at emails for days and not be stressed out about it, I would have told you that you were crazy. But here I am happily enjoying my time and already very grateful for this week.

Thursday arrived gray, rainy and a little cooler. Since we were not riding until the afternoon we spent a lazy morning. Laurie had me start again on Klass. After we did some arm and body exercises to stretch and warm-up, Laurie worked with me again on leg position. She had me keep some bend in my knee while having a flexible ankle. Not only do I lock in my hip, I lock in my ankles as well! I had a hard time relaxing my ankles. Laurie had me drop my irons and point my toes down then up so I did not lock them in a tense heel down position. This attention to detail greatly helped me pull all the pieces together for a stronger body position and alignment. Klass was showing some leg fatigue so we kept our lesson a little shorter by finishing with using my seat in the sitting trot to lengthen and shorten the trot.

Gabel was up next and we continued to do all our work in the snaffle. Gabel goes equally well in the snaffle or double and Laurie wanted to continue to leverage the quality of work in the snaffle. Laurie emphasized taking the body alignment we improved on Klass into my ride on Gabel, particularly my improved leg position. To challenge the correctness of my aids she

had me collect the canter without any rein/hand aids. It was incredible and I had a major revelation as to the concept of 'soft hands'.

After a short warm-up, Laurie had me go back to the exercise on the quarter-line – 'baby' shoulder-in to narrowing the base of the hind legs into shoulder-fore to half-pass to shoulder-fore to leg yield – in order to test our progress and Gabel's responsiveness to the aids. She then introduced a new exercise to continue to build Gabel's strength. We picked up the counter-canter on the quarter-line into shoulder-fore. We continued through the short side and then lengthened the canter down the long side. Gabel tends to string out in his lengthenings and it was a major revelation how I needed to use the shoulder-fore in order to keep Gabel through, straight and powerful behind. The lengthenings became uphill and bounding. We then continued in counter-canter down the centerline and back into shoulder-fore then narrowing the base before moving into the half-pass. Back on the long side, we did a 20 meter circle but as we came to the centerline the second time Laurie had me use only my seat to execute a half pirouette.....was she nuts, collecting the canter in counter-canter on a 20 meter circle into a half pirouette??? But guess what....Gabel was so much more responsive to my seat and legs that we did it, much to my surprise!

We changed direction and after a couple of miscues on my part, we successfully completed the exercise with equal success. Gabel was so willing and gave me 150% today. We had two major revelations today and, as Laurie pointed out, by working correctly neither of us had to work as hard thus making the session a huge success. The exercise she gave me with the counter canter to 20 meter then into the half pirouette is very difficult....not one she wants me to ever do everyday. But her point was to get me to think outside the box and get creative with classical patterns to help develop strength in Gabel. I wish I had another week left rather than just one day left.



Laurie and I after our Thursday lesson

Friday awoke much colder and windy. We had an early start so that we could head home in the afternoon. Laurie had me go through Gabel's warm-up incorporating the 'baby' shoulder-in then bringing the outside leg in track with the foreleg into the shoulder-fore. She wanted to make sure I thoroughly understood and could execute the exercise at home. She then wanted to finish up our week with a lunge lesson on Gabel taking the position improvements I was able to make in my lunge lesson on Klass. Gabel took over the lunge lesson horse role like a champ. We started with the arm exercises then Laurie asked me if I was comfortable taking away my irons. I figured this was the time to go for broke and away the irons went.

I have such a conditioned response to try to grip with my thighs to sit Gabel's trot that working without stirrups showed my glaring flaws. Laurie had me then also knot up the reins and use the grab strap so that I could focus on dropping my legs and relaxing my thighs. Only then could I start to let my hips follow Gabel's trot. Laurie then took it one step farther and had me close my eyes and just focus on the movement. Left. Right. Left. Right. Let the saddle move my hips. Relax my thighs. Relax my ankles. Lift my right arm over my head. Lift my left arm over my head. Lengthen my upper body. Lengthen my lower body. Left. Right. Left. Right. I was deep in the saddle and feeling Gabel's swing through his back. If only for those few minutes, but it is an improvement and major step forward in more effectively riding my horse.

After getting the horses ready to go, Mary Beth and I packed up for our 5 hour drive home. With the ponies all loaded and munching on full hay bags, we said our good-byes to Laurie and our hosts at Nightmare Farms. The good news is Laurie is back at my farm in 4 weeks and I can't wait to continue the progress we have made in our week of training courtesy of the Gifted Grant.

I am so grateful to have had this opportunity and can not thank Carol Lavell for her generosity in creating the Gifted Grant and The Dressage Foundation for selecting me for this wonderful experience.