

Effects of Dressage Training on the Young Event Horse by Kirsten Lotter

I am a student in ADU University. Cean is my mentor and she encouraged me to write about how dressage effects my training of Kruiser, my young event horse. Obviously dressage is one of the 3 disciplines eventers do at each horse trial, but it is more than that. It helps develop a more supple and adjustable horse to make cross country safer and more fun.

I take a dressage lesson each week with Grace Harris and we work with the bigger picture in mind. That is, moving Kruiser through the USDF levels using the classical training pyramid. She demands a higher level of connection and throughness. Kruiser is 5 and I don't feel he is ready to work quite that hard everyday, so I also take lessons with a local hunter jumper coach, Beverly Manroe. Every lesson I tell her what we have been working on with Grace and we incorporate some of those things into the flat work session as well as work at flat work that pertains to what we do jumping. Straightness, tempo and position (sound familiar...all the same things that I do in dressage but in a lower, longer frame - but still working over his topline).

I bought Kruiser when he was just 3 and while I did have a young horse once before, that was not successful and I had no idea what I was doing (I think the horse is in a better place now). So I count this as my first properly supervised young horse training experience.

For quite a long time Kruiser was very unbalanced and tended just to run along on his forehead. He was quite difficult on the flat and it was frustrating. For the last year I think I have made steady progress with him and his balance is slowly but surely shifting backwards. However, it seems our current issue is keeping Kruiser forward and in front of my leg. As Cean pointed out, it's often one step forward and then several back. When Kruiser and are in sync it is quite wonderful. Sometimes that's the whole ride, other times it's 10 minutes.

This was his first year of going to USEA Horse Trials, and the first one was Meadow Creek Park doing the 5yr old Young Event horse test. Kruiser needed to be able to do a 1st level type test and jump a short course of 3 foot jumps. He was quite confident jumping 3 foot so I figured the jumping would not be a problem. I knew the dressage test was beyond his ability but figured I'd just work at keeping him in the ring during the test and as relaxed as possible. Circumstances dictated that we waited for our turn much longer than I expected and Kruiser was bored and disinterested by the time it was his turn to go in the ring. So not a good test but we stayed in the ring and he did the test movements as well as he could on the day. Sadly, the jumping was worse...I think he was sick of the whole thing by the time the jumping came around and the course didn't flow very well so we had some stops. In fact he flat out would not go over one jump on the course. So, it was not very successful in my mind but it was a lesson learned. Those young horse events are not very good outings for the average youngster.

Dropped back down to Beginner Novice and did 3 horse trials at that level - Kruiser was very successful at all three and demonstrated an improvement in his dressage tests. Recently I feel an improved level of relaxation and cadence and hope that comes through in his last horse trial of the year. His jumping has been great and he has had no jumping or time penalties.

One challenge I have had is keeping Kruiser forward and in front of my leg (jumping and in dressage), he is the first horse I have owned that did not come off the track so he is not as self propelled as the others. However, while having a horse with a naturally slower and more cadenced gait has been a learning curve for me, it is a nice treat to not be battling for control all the time. It is really important for a jumping horse to be right there, willing to move forward or come back at a moments notice to get to a jump safely and correctly. The levels in eventing - Beginner Novice through Advanced ask the horse to be more adjustable in a careful, gradual manner. There is much more leeway for a rider or horse error at the lower levels. That said, the horse needs to learn at the lower levels to listen to the rider and the rider needs to learn how to ride the correct pace and make adjustments on course. When those things don't happen, accidents, refusals and run outs happen. In stadium, that's when you see the rails start tumbling down.

I have taken Kruiser to a few USEF schooling shows where I think we have done nicely. He finds the 20 x 60 arena a little easier to negotiate. I am really working hard to have the same quality of test at the horse trials. There are many challenges - the tiny arena, the many distractions and not as nice warm up areas (mostly you warm up on the XC field) but I believe with time, Kruiser will come to relax as much as he does at dressage shows. I intend to do some USDF shows in the new year so I can work on my dressage showing skills so I can do a better job at the horse trials. I will continue to show occasionally at the local hunter shows so that Kruiser and I can continue to hone our skills in stadium - his level of relaxation has increased enormously in the last few months in the jumping ring.

Several people have suggested that I only train Kruiser for dressage. I always say no. I believe the jumping and conditioning work has lead to a more skilled horse and a much happier horse. The dressage has allowed him to be happier in his jumping work. There is no argument anymore. He goes forward and comes back pretty well for a young horse.

I am excited to ride him every day that I do (yes we do have some really bad days but they are mostly good) and love taking him to shows. I have a plan, that hopefully in a few years, will land me a really great horse whether it's in the dressage ring, on the cross country course or simply enjoying a relaxing trail ride. I say to people that try to shift me from my plan (an extra show or clinic) , "no, I have my plan and I'm sticking with it!"