

Gil Merrick's "Straight from the Horses Mind" Clinic

I would have liked to say, that horses are all that are on my mind. Unfortunately, being a junior in high school has short-sided my equestrian life, debilitating my work in the ring. From studying for AP exams, SATs, SAT subject tests, regular class exams, and completing mountains of homework, I found it very hard to concentrate on horses and school in ways that would benefit both. When I was with horses, I would be thinking about SATs; when it came to studying for school, all I could think about was the bucking my horse had delivered and how I wished I could fix it right then. My mother nagged me about my school work; my horse was not reacting to my rein aids, barreling through them with a dangerous gusto.

So where would I find a balance? I thought to myself just a couple of days ago. Time is just flying by and I have not found success. How do I make myself, my mother, and my horse happier? Let's just say that Gil Merrick's clinic "Straight from the Horse's Mind", opened up many doors in my mind that will contribute to success in my equestrian life and outside of it as well. The seminar was presented by the Dressage Trainers Network, a group of trainers from around Massachusetts dedicated to the art of teaching, on April 9th, 2011 at Harvard, MA.

I am at the point in my equine training, where I can start to assess a horse and what the horse might need from its rider. Gil's account of the four main survival instincts have made me rethink the way I react to a misbehaving horse. The instincts include stay with the herd, flee from danger, conserve energy, and stay comfortable. I never considered conserving energy and staying comfortable before. Gil explained that, naturally in the wild, horses graze and remain relatively stationary. They are saving energy for the moment a predator attacks and they have to full on sprint for more than five minutes to get away. Horses are not naturally athletic, so when we get on them and say "you are going to be an athlete" we should not act surprised if the horse does not have a natural tendency to move.

The fourth instinct was to stay comfortable, another instinct that I did not consider before. A horse will do what we ask them to do, if they understand and they are able to do so. Gil continued to explain with a personal trainer analogy. We as equestrians must take care of our horses in the same way a personal trainer would fit and tailor a work-out to fit the client's state of mind, and physical capabilities on any given day. I comprehended it as if a horse is sore, we should not ask them to jump four feet and then be surprised if the horse refuses the jump. The fact of the matter is, the horse simply can't and wants to stay comfortable by not jumping. We cannot reprimand such behavior, rather learn to spot the reason and work with it appropriately.

The next part of the seminar addressed how the horse lives in the NOW. They are constantly taking in stimuli from around them, but do not think about the future or the past, as humans do. Gil comically yet professionally gave us an example of such thinking. He connected this thinking and living in the moment with the way we then translates our own stresses. Because the horse lives in the NOW, we as riders cannot expect them to *not* react to our stress that we may bring to the barn with us on any day. He taught us to practice leaving all the other stress behind at the barn front door, and to simply think about the horse. We did a practice exercise where we listened to a classical piece, and tried to just think about the music and nothing else. He made a point that really struck home. This living in the "now" is a problem for me, as it is for many people. He gave us a practice exercise, and suggested meditation, that would help all of us learn to take things as they are and to let go of all "upsets" when we enter the arena. I understood then why my horse was throwing these fits it's because even though I thought I was controlling my

‘outside of barn stress’, I was translating it into my body language and laying heavy on the reins-causing my horse to become uncomfortable.

Elaborating on the “upsets” of life, Gil outlined the three major sources of upsets which include having unfulfilled expectations, thwarted intentions, and withheld communication. He gave us beautiful examples of each, and how to handle them. Mr. Merrick suggested that when we have unfulfilled expectations, it’s because we didn’t form an agreement with someone that would work. We essentially set ourselves up for disappointment by being vague and in turn, expecting precise results. An agreement should have a very specific “what” and this should have a measurable outcome. The agreement should have a specific “when” that both people forming this agreement agree on.

While Gil was talking mostly about barn assignments and how people get upset for example, if a horse isn’t fed at an expected time and such, I could relay this thinking to my everyday life. My mom wants me to study more, but we have conflicted conversations when my SAT practice doesn’t relay wanted results. So, after the seminar I sat down with my mother. We decided on what we agree my scores should be, by what time I should strive to get them, and how much it will require studying. We will see if we uphold this agreement, but I have confidence that through setting this agreement and having the confrontational conversation, it will have positive results.

Afterwards we learned about the progression of stress due to the three major sources of upset and where the stress can end up. At that point, Gil brought the conversation full circle and applied everything we learned about ourselves back to the horses and how to handle our lives as equestrians.

In the end, I learned about my horse and myself in such a way that will affect me for the better for the rest of my life. I was expecting a seminar on simply horses but Gil makes an excellent life coach, knowing exactly what to say to motivate us and how to find control of our daily stresses. These eight hours with Gil have been a blessing and will bring me, and others, success on a horse and outside of the barn. I owe it all to Dressage4Kids. This type of knowledge is something that lasts forever; it is the greatest gift of all. Thank you Dressage4Kids, for this amazing opportunity to grow as a rider and a part of the equestrian community.