

Scottsdale Dressage, Just Keep Smiling

Back in 2007 I went to Scottsdale to watch the big Arab show. I told myself that one day I would ride there, it was my dream. Since I was just thinking about learning dressage I was especially amazed by a gal riding a very naughty Arab. He did nothing right in the test. She barely stayed in the court and had to adjust her helmet several times as he bounced her all over the arena. She just kept smiling. I thought to myself, if she can do this, so can I, someday!

My good friend Mark Schuerman called me up the first of December and said, "I have a good horse, let's go to Scottsdale." I thought for a moment and said, "What the heck, I will mail my entry!" 2014 was a tough year in my Family. My 60 year old sister was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in January and she died October 13. The experience made me realize how short life is and that we should live every day to its fullest, follow your dreams!

Feb. 9, Monday. My husband and I loaded up the trailer and 17 hours later we were in Scottsdale. Good thing we are endurance riders because that was one long haul to do in one day. Mark Schuerman took us on the scenic route! We arrived around 11:00; got the stalls ready, horses put to bed, found our RV parking space. Wow, I am really in Scottsdale!

Tuesday. The next afternoon it was time to show my horse Exchange the arenas, warm-up area, etc... You would think a 17 hour trailer ride the day before would take the edge off a horse but I was wrong. The former race horse, endurance horse and now dressage horse was on his tip toes absorbing all the energy in the warm Arizona air. There was quite a variety of horses and riders sharing the arenas. Lots of longeing, whip cracking, reining horses, western horses, halter horses, you name it. I attempted to do a short ride and quickly realized that there would be no quality of work, just try to stay on. Good thing I had another day to let him settle before my first test on Thursday. Wednesday was a bit better but certainly not what I had envisioned. Exchange was a handful. It did not help that he was staying in a stall, tough on a horse use to turnout every day.

The following are my emails to the folks at home anxiously awaiting my Scottsdale news.

Thursday, Day 1 of showing.

So today was interesting. Haven't shown since last July. Was not sure what Exchange would give me based on the last 2 days of non-compliance. Good warmup, started out our test well, and then all hell broke loose. The courts are next to a huge building where golf carts fly by behind a fence you can't really see through. Partway through my first test a huge bang happened followed by subsequent scary noises of metal being tossed. The caterers were tossing large metal trays onto a cart that Exchange could not see but sure could hear. I tried to stay on course but Exchange got very scared not wanting to go anywhere near the rail. Within moments the judge told me to just stop, she stood up and we all looked in the direction of the chaos but could do nothing. Finally the loaded cart moved on but Exchange was scared, couldn't blame him. We just managed to do what we could but he was tense and not listening. Medium canter turned into running for his life. That about wraps-up my test. Got a, "sorry for the bad luck" from the judge. Still got a red ribbon in the class in spite of the caterer's cart.

Next test hours later.

It went well but not great. The photographer stood up in his little booth next to the rail just as I began my medium canter. I could have touched him. The clicking of the camera sounded like a whip cracking right next to us. Exchange hates that noise. Medium canter turned into tempi changes. Tempi changes are not required at this level and you don't get any extra points for them. He was a bit on edge but had

moments of listening. When we did our final halt we got a 62.4. I was proud of him. If he and I could just put it all together we will be great. Hope the photographer got some good photos.

All said we will just build on what we have. He is an Arab doing real dressage and it shows, but he is an Arab. One movement at a time, good or not so good. He is trying. I am thrilled with him especially since I was scared to ride him on Tuesday, we are making progress! Tomorrow is a day of 3 tests, hope the caterers are done! Got a beautiful plaque for the win. Scottsdale is crazy.

Friday

Today was interesting. I had better luck than the other folks in my classes. We did get 3 blue ribbons but my scores are not up to our capabilities. Exchange was scared to death that the catering cart was going to get him from yesterday. I had a water truck with air brakes in my first class just before my first halt today. When all was done we got 3 beautiful plaques for our day's work. We are making progress. The good news is I got 6.5 and a 7 on my turn on the haunches. I seem to have a handle on them. Got an 8 on my halt and a 7 and 7.5 on simple changes. The counter canter was falling apart, tough to balance with a tense horse but great comments about his uphill canter, 7 on gaits. He is running for his life and swapping leads behind as he runs for the exit, the catering demons are haunting him. The judge wants more thrust from behind in my medium trot; I think they are good, feels a bit like getting shot out of a cannon from my perspective!

My warmups have been challenging. Exchange is losing interest and getting cranky. He thinks this much time at a horse show is not a great idea. I have had to adjust my game plan to suit his mood. I have been focusing on relaxation. He knows all the movements; we just have to stay loose. If he stays happy I get a better test. We are both learning a lot about compromise! My dance partner wants to lead. If our warm-up area and courts could just be in a better location everyone would be much happier. We seem to be the poor step-children of Scottsdale. All the dressage competitors have complained to management but the Westworld folks don't care and will not do anything. This morning a cherry picker lift with 2 guys in the basket actually entered our warm up arena followed by a fork lift, as the riders screamed, I quickly exited so Exchange would not get set off. Not sure why they want to torture us but dressage is not a great spectator draw. There has been times where the situation is just not safe. So tomorrow is another day! Hope Exchange has 2 more good rides in him and we can pull all our training together.

Saturday, Championship Day

So I would be lying if I said I am not disappointed with today's rides. Sure 4 blue ribbons are great but the championship was won with a 61 and a 64. If I had my good horse I think I could have done better than that. Too bad my dance partner had a couple meltdowns.

I started my first test with a 6.5 halt and an "inattentive" comment from the judge. There was a lot of energy in the air. I made my first left turn towards M and Exchange went bonkers. Right before us were baby Egyptian halter horses on the evil road getting "warmed up" for their big entrance into the halter class being held in the scary caterer building. Exchange wanted no part of that and wanted to run for his life instead of medium trot. We had quite the discussion, made an extra circle and then he refused to move. He was focused on the demon babies that were getting flagged, not my aids. He did his signature corkscrew twist and buck, thought I was going off! I considered getting off and excusing myself from the court but quickly realized that would not be safe either. Better to stay on and hang on! I took a breath and a deep seat and he then ran for his life to the end of the arena, across the diagonal. We did various gaits from extended trot to extended canter; these were not required test movements. We kind of got into our own freestyle. I banked the turn and tried to do some version of a shoulder-in with Bronco Billy.

We get to half turn on the haunches and the judges' comments were "nice piaffe and pirouette", you get the picture. Medium canter, scored a 3 "nose to chest" comment. You bet, that was the only brake I had! Surprisingly I got a 6.5 on my serpentine and a 7 on the final simple change. I was really thinking halt. Talk about using your core and seat aids! Got a 7 on the final halt, we were both glad the test was over.

I had a judge with a sense of humor. She judged me 3 times and liked Exchange. The Judge's comments: "A' for persistence by the rider. Unfortunately horse not here today but you can see great piaffe and passage potential, he sure can sit! Shows great talent and athleticism."

So now I have my next test in 30 minutes. Mark suggested I longe him. I opt for taking him back in the warm-up and try to get him to check back in with me. Tony even took him over to the baby horse entrance so he could face his fear but that didn't help. Maybe lots of transitions will.

They took a break and I was the first horse to go in. I am not very confident that the brain is back. I put my leg on and now he refuses to enter the arena, judge watching! I spun him in several circles and felt like a barrel horse getting ready to run the pattern. We bolted into the court. 7 on my halt! Comments to follow were, "tense, resistant, jiggling, needs relaxation, tense." Still got a 6 on simple changes and serpentine, 7 final halt. Judge says, "The answer to tension like this is to lighten rather than restrict. It is a leap of faith worth taking." Did he not notice the rodeo in the court beside him just minutes ago? That was me!

Just bad luck and a horse with talent and not a brain all the time. My warm-up was fabulous and then downhill from there. I had so many people come up to me after the first test and then again after the second test and say, "you have guts" and "that was good riding". My husband Tony said, "Sorry the test went bad but I have never seen you ride so well!" Made me feel good. The spectators got some excitement. I think I invented a new sport, Rodeo Dressage. So Exchange and I need more work! The distractions were just unlucky and I was not the only competitor that was disappointed. Still having a great time in Scottsdale! It really is something to experience.

Since Scottsdale is now just a memory I have had time to reflect on the journey. It was fun. I learned a lot about showing, being flexible and my equine partner. Sometimes you just have to make the best of what you are faced with, no whining. Exchange tried to be good; he is just a bit of a drama queen at times and very exuberant. There were moments when he was honestly scared and moments he was a brilliant dressage horse. There are lots more dressage shows in our future together. Scottsdale was just another horse show with fancy awards and lots of bling. Going forward I tell myself, "No matter what life throws you, you've just got to keep smiling!"