

Trainer Spotlight: Kelly (O'Leary) Boyd

-Heather Fitzgerald

We've all heard it. There are no shortcuts in dressage, but one of the most certain routes to deepening your skills, to becoming a more effective rider, is to spend time on the lunge line. This idea had filtered through my mind on occasion as I began a midlife transition to dressage, but it was Janet Foy's comments during the 2009 Judges' Continuing Education session that shoved me off my stoop of ambivalence to stride purposefully toward regular lunge lessons. Janet shared much wisdom that day and several times spoke about the critical importance of developing an influential seat, about what is evident in the horse's movement when that is present and when it is not. I went headlong in search of a lunge teacher. The only person I found who is both deeply experienced teaching lunge lessons and truly enjoys it, was Kelly.

Kelly has an impressive US- and German-based training, clinic, and show resume. She has trained with Jan Ebeling, Sue Halasz and Scott Hassler. She has cliniced with Steffen Peters, Susan Jacoma, Leslie Webb, Michael Klimke, Axel Steiner, Janet Foy, Hilda Gurney, Christine Taurig, Stephan Kieswetter, Andras Szieberth, Siegfried Winkler, Randall Moore and Larry Fleming. She is two scores away from her USDF Gold Medal. Kelly studies dressage actively. She reads, researches, and listens to books-on-tape as she drives to lessons and clinics. Kelly has a steel-trap mind that retains masters' teachings, which she incorporates to support the needs of her students and their horses.

Kelly is perhaps best known for her partnership with JB Andrew, "Andy," who she rode from Training Level to Grand Prix, placed nationally at all levels shown, and who was the first Mustang to reach the FEI levels. Andy is not only the first horse to be inducted into the Wild Horse and Burro Foundation's Hall of Fame, he has his very own Breyer model!

All this, and she is authentically enthusiastic about taking me (no pedigree whatsoever!) back to the core principles of effective riding.

Our year-and-a-half, to date, on the lunge line, which I've done predominantly on her horse Opus, has expanded and accelerated my understanding of this magnificent endeavor called dressage. Kelly started by assessing where my weaknesses were, using very effective exercises to isolate my upper body from my lower body, disassembling my seat, from my legs, from my hands. She instantly evaluated that my legs were a block which didn't allow my seat to act independently.



We worked on lunge exercises like knee lifts, scissors, frog (you can just imagine!), adding punching, juggling, rope climbing, windmills, backstroke and many other forms of giggle-inducing torture (for me) and entertainment (for her), all at the walk, trot and canter. Never did I feel silly or stupid. Kelly is a natural cheerleader who encourages you to correctly execute the exercise and voilà, like a key in a lock, she is able to isolate and dismantle blocked parts and reassemble them into a better coordinated and more effective whole.

I've actually become much better at these exercises over time, an indication of developing the right muscle groups in balance, but the real magic is what it has done to my partnership with my horse. Because my lessons have not just been about working on the lunge line – Kelly is always talking about the training pyramid, about the goal of harmony between horse and rider, about illuminating the balance between being as subtle and gentle as possible but knowing when to be quietly firm – she has created easy pathways to reveal what sometimes feels mystical about dressage. While I do the equivalent of patting my head and rubbing my stomach through various exercises, Kelly is surreptitiously teaching me about timing. She has an uncanny ability to create fun and distraction from the sometimes body- and mind-gripping, self-imposed pressure of seeking dressage prowess, to help break through to the joys of improvement. Kelly can accurately read if something is not making sense, and come at it as many different ways as necessary to keep you relaxed and waiting for it not only

to connect in your mind, but in your body. The number of “aha” moments she has illuminated for me are innumerable. I have fun, I learn, my confidence has deepened, I take new understanding home to my mare, and she is happy.

Kelly keeps notes following every lesson, systematically planning for our next one. Just when I think I have something down, she’ll challenge me and the horse by doing the exercise over cavalletti or low jumps. I have seen her work with mares and sensitive, complex horses in training with her, and these

fairly talented horses grow mentally and physically, transforming into willing, huge-hearted, happy partners.

My initial plan was to do lunge lessons for a year. I know now that there is a lifetime of key-in-a-lock discoveries lunge lessons can deliver. With Kelly, that path will include plenty of warm encouragement and good-natured insistence on adherence to the classical principles.

For more information about Kelly, please visit www.classicalequestrian.com.
