4-H Dressage in Indiana

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Getting a dressage program started in your county 4-H horse and pony project can be challenging to say the least, but with patience and perseverance it can be done. The phenomenal success in Hamilton County is a case in point.

In 2006 Denise Henke and I contacted the local 4-H Horse and Pony leader and offered to present a dressage clinic at one of their weekly workshops. She was very glad to have us come as she wanted to expose her kids to as many equestrian disciplines as possible. That first workshop was kind of crazy because we were dealing with all sorts of kids on all sorts of ponies and horses with every type of saddle and bit you can imagine. Most of these kids had never done anything but go around the oval, usually at breakneck speed, in one direction then the other. We laid out a small arena with a few jump poles and a set of letters. We had the riders ride nose to tail in formation and showed them how to ride a 20 meter circle at each end and in the middle and how to change rein across the diagonal and “go large” around the arena. It was pretty hilarious at first and we had a lot of fun as did the kids. But the most amazing thing happened by the end of the hour or so we worked. We had 10 or 12 kids riding like a precision drill team as we called out various moves (watch out Spanish Riding School) ! The kids were grinning from ear to ear and the watching parents were picking their jaws up off the ground.

Following this humble beginning we were given the opportunity to offer dressage training as often as we wished which ended up being almost every week from May through mid-July. We focused on just teaching them how to ride a test—arena geometry. Forget round and on the bit; it was a couple of years before we even broached the subject of contact. Each week we set up our little arena with jump poles and letters and worked with individuals or small groups of 2-4 kids. Anyone was welcome to try riding a test, and most of them gave it a try, even the contesters who discovered it was not as easy as it looked. We continue to do this every summer.

When it came time for county fair we were allowed to offer dressage competition on Sunday morning during the English horse show. We set up a real dressage arena complete with flowers and a horse trailer for the judge in what served as the warm-up arena. The kids could sign up for as many tests as they wished and they came and rode them as they had time between regular horse show classes. In 2006 we had 9 riders. The following year we had 25 and it has grown each year since. By 2010 the dressage show had become so large that we went to the management and asked if we could have the main arena on Saturday morning since it was not being used for anything else. They agreed and the show has continued to grow and now takes most of the day. It is center stage during the Hamilton county fair so we get a lot of spectators. In 2013 we had 79 rides scheduled, from Intro through First Levels. This created a new problem because we had to be finished by 6:00 pm when contesting was supposed to start, and our last ride was scheduled for 7:00 pm. It all worked out due to some stormy weather which resulted in a number of scratches bringing us down to 58 rides and we finished by 5:30 pm. Once again we have made some changes for 2014 in order to accommodate the expected participation.

Many, many people have supported this effort. Major credit has to go to the Hamilton County Horsemens’ Club which essentially manages and maintains the horse show complex at the Hamilton county fairgrounds as well as assumes major responsibility for running the 4-H horse and pony competitions at the fair each year. This is an incredibly committed group, and they have been amazing to work with. The group consists of people involved in many different equestrian disciplines (most of whom no longer have kids active in 4-H) and proves that all can work together to everyone’s benefit. HCHC even holds an IDS approved dressage show year with all proceeds going to fund the 4-H dressage program in Hamilton county. So far they have purchased their own full size dressage arena and a set of letters. Along the way we have gotten several other IDS members involved in running the dressage show during the fair as well as the IDS “L” Grads who have generously donated their time and expertise to judge. It truly does “take a village”.

About the same time we became involved in 4-H at the county level we were asked to assist at the Indiana State Fair with the dressage competition. Over the past eight years that competition has also grown although not as much as in Hamilton county. IDS members provide a dressage arena, letters and flowers as well as scheduling, scoring and management services. IDS awards a one year membership to the highest scorer in each division (Intro, Training and First levels). Denise and I were thrilled when our riders finally reached a level of competence to go to the State Fair. And we had an even greater reward the year Hamilton county riders won all three divisions.

I would like to share a quote from a thank you note sent to me by one of the young ladies from Hamilton county I had worked with on a regular basis. She had been able to compete up to First Level and was schooling Second Level at the time she graduated from high school and was off to college.

“*…You have really fostered my simple love for horses into a lifelong passion for the art of*

*communicating with them on an entirely new level. Although I may be taking a break for this new phase in my life, I will not give up on the dreams you’ve helped encourage through dressage”*

Sharing you passion for dressage touches lives. It’s up to you to get involved locally.