On August 11-13 SWVADA hosted a clinic on rider biomechanics with Stacey Pattison and held at the Alphin Stuart Arena at Virginia Tech. The program began on Friday night with an interactive lecture and demonstration involving a white board and a Balimo chiropractic chair. We had 28 participants for this session and most brought dessert to share. The purpose of the lecture was to get the riders to think about how even small adjustments to our position will affect the horse. There were questions like “what part of the horse’s body is the first to move forward?” “If you pull the head to the inside, where will the haunches go?” The Balimo chair easily pointed out rider crookedness and tilt, and helped to teach us how to sit on one seat bone or the other or whether you already do weight one more than the other in “neutral”. This was especially useful for our 2 visually impaired riders who largely learn by feel. There was a lot of discussion and questions and answers among the full group.

We held mounted sessions on Saturday and Sunday for riders of all levels, from training through PSG. There were eleven rides Saturday and ten on Sunday. There was a LOT of focus on straightness and how that often needed to be accessed with counter flexion or even counter bend. It was apparent that a LOT of us tend to over bend our horses (that discussion of where the haunches will go when you pull on the inside rein? Yeah) and work waaay to hard when simply weighting a seat bone may suffice.

Since Stacey stayed at my farm, I was able to ride all 3 of my horses in lessons. Farben, my 18 year old trak X curly is working PSG, but tends to have a late change in one direction. We worked on straightness and keeping him from bracing in his neck and wanting to rush off in the left lead canter making a clean change to the right difficult or impossible. He is a tough cookie who thinks he knows more than I do and does not like to wait for direction, so I have my work cut out for me. We went back to basics (of course), refining my aids for straightening and bending and getting him to stretch his stiff side. We did not “fix” the problem that day, but with the tools I have and the homework, we are getting many more clean changes.

After the day at Alphin-Stuart ended Saturday, we came home and I rode Wasabi, my 11 year old Oldenburg gelding who is rehabbing from a fractured pelvis from 2-3 years ago. I have been struggling to get him supple both longitudinally and laterally and mostly want to know that my “slow and steady” way of working him is the right way. . Again we focused on making him really straight (again my tendency to over-bend to the left). When he is forward and straight he accepts the bridle better. He needs a livelier connection to his mouth before he will flex his jaw and I need to get this without the over-bending. We have also made a lot of progress using these exercises.

I took my 6 year old GRP, Julep, to the VT arena for her second road trip ever. She can be very spooky even at home. Much of our session consisted of getting her straight (see the theme here?) and forward to the contact and her focus improved in all three gaits. Once she connected to the bridle I can open up the stride and she can be quite lovely and cadenced. We added bend simply by sitting a little stronger on my inside seat bone. She tried to push me to the right and we corrected this with a little counter flexion and conscious effort on my part to sit to the left.

Candi Hylton brought her young and large warmblood, Be Be. He can be a bit “looky” at home and he is a big mover which can shake his rider’s confidence. They worked on allowing him to be a bit more forward and not depend upon his rider’s hands for balance. When the reins got a little longer and he carried himself he was quite lovely! This pair has a bright future.

Judy Altizer rode her 14 year old Arabian mare. Judy always thought that Jasmine carried her haunches to the right. Stacey pointed out that she popped her left shoulder out, not her haunches and they worked on reminding her to move her shoulders to the right, in front of her haunches, thus making her straight. She also convinced Judy to ride more from her seat and less from her leg . Together this has made this 14.2 hand mare take a much larger stride and carry herself in a better posture.

Casey Murphy Moyer said I wish I could’ve taken two lessons with Stacy! Ever since her lesson, I have been more aware of my seat and how it effects my horse. I haven’t fixed everything perfectly but I understand more of what I am communicating with my horse by using my seat. Would definitely take another lesson with her if given the opportunity.

Meg Jones and Chris Wohlwind agreed that Stacy helped them to do more with their seat bones and less with their hands to connect their horses to the outside rein.

Kim Smith said Stacy helped me refine my seat aids to get more out of my horse with less effort. She addressed crookedness by adjusting the rider’s rib cage instead of the hip/shoulder which was much more effective.

All of the riders went home with something to work on and a great satisfaction that they learned some new tools or had some of the old ones reinforced.

SWVADA thanks VADA for contributing grant money towards this opportunity. We are in a dressage desert in this area and it can be costly to bring in a trainer of this caliber and offer sessions at a very low cost. We gained several new members in order to participate in this clinic and hope to be able to offer this sort of learning experience every summer. We had auditors from the local area and even one of the IDA coaches from another university.

With great appreciation,

Laura Nelson, pres SWVADA