

Training with a Wizard – by Lindsay Seidel-Wassenaar

No, this is not a story about me meeting Harry Potter and going to Hogwarts to train under the headmaster wizard, Albus Dumbledore, or flying instructor Madam Hooch. But this is a story about my two horses and me going to train with the Canadian headmaster dressage wizard and wizardess. Better known as Team Irwin (Jaimey and Tina).

Firstly, I need to recognize a new friend, Beth Murray, for the brilliant idea of the label “wizard”. There is something legitimately magical about Jaimey’s coaching and how both horse and rider respond to the Irwin training system. But in saying that, I want to recognize the classical fundamentals and adherence to the training scale that both Jaimey and Tina follow in their regime. Perhaps there is absolutely nothing magical or mystical about the actual training, but when your horse is truly aligned and through, the feeling you experience is magical!

Let me take a step or two backwards (us dressage people will be used to this!) in my story:

My first ride with Jaimey Irwin was at the 2019 Mane Event in Red Deer. Right from the start it was clear he was a nice guy with an incredible eye for the horses. Immediately I remember him saying, your canter to the right is slightly different than your canter to the left. “Oh really?” I replied. Thinking back now, I realize this was completely because of less straightness and alignment one way over the other. And by the end of this article you will realize, I am now obsessed with a horse’s straightness.

Now I need to recognize the EAADA for continuing to bring Jaimey in for clinics to the Edmonton area and the ADA for sponsoring the 2020 clinic series. This is how I got to know Jaimey a little better and got hooked on the training system. I would take one horse for a weekend with Jaimey and the results were mind blowing. And that was only 2 days of riding, on one horse! That is when I began to ask the question, “what if I could train like that for a longer period of time, with more horses?” Therefore, I asked Jaimey one day if I could come train with him and his wife, Tina, for a while in 2020. And he said yes!

Then 2020 came and we all know what happened in March/April/May. I don’t think that needs to be revisited, so long story short, my Spring training and competing plans in Ontario were out the window. But things settled down over the summer and we revisited the idea for the Fall. I had forgotten how stressful it can be hauling horses across the country, but we got all our ducks in a row by the middle of September and my two partners, Gaga (9-year-old KWPN) and Iko (7-year-old Canadian Warmblood), and I were on our way. We shipped the horses with a professional hauling company, and I flew out to meet them on arrival at Stoney Lake Equestrian in Stouffville, Ontario.



Iko in his stall in the main barn



Gaga handwalking around the property



Chic old barn at Stoney Lake Equestrian

The horses were definitely shell shocked upon arrival, but within a couple days they were used to their new routine and we were enjoying the gorgeous Fall colours Ontario has to offer. Stoney Lake is a fabulous facility and everyone was so welcoming – both staff and fellow riders! I specifically want to thank the hard working and fun staff at the barn! They made it much easier for the horses and me to settle in and the laughs we enjoyed together will always be remembered.

Training with the horses was five days/week with lessons on both horses each day. I could go on and on about the training and different exercises, but one of the big takeaways for me was that dressage is an art. As an engineer by trade, this can be difficult to remember sometimes. But as dressage riders, we cannot overthink, or overanalyse things. So much of riding is about the feel and connection with the horse. And that is what makes Jaimey the wizard he is – as a coach he is able to explain and lead you toward the correct feel of things. Like the feel for a proper shoulder-in. A shoulder-in where the horse is actually bending around your inside leg because of your connection on the outside rein. That iconic outside rein connection! Now that is what gets a dressage rider excited!

This all stems from that critical training piece: ALIGNMENT. When you truly have the horse straight, meaning you have control of the outside shoulder, with the inside hind leg stepping under, not blocking on the inside rein (I think I almost have this ingrained in my brain now!), and the horse is in front of the leg, pushing the energy through the entire body, from the hind leg, through the back, shoulders, neck and into the contact, then you have an engaged and connected horse. That is your base to your pyramid. From there you can start to build increased power and cadence with a correctly executed half-halt.

The half-halt. I have a new appreciation and understanding of the half-halt. I have to credit this learning to not only Jaimey, but also to his wife Tina. I think most of us know of Tina – with that picture perfect position, she is one of Canada's best riders. I was fortunate enough to have them let me ride one of their Grand Prix horses, mainly to sort out my flying change aid, but also to teach me how to effectively sit into the saddle and half-halt! My first ride was not only eye-opening and humbling, but also exhausting. I was knackered. My arms were sore (never a good sign – where was my seat?!) and I struggled with the timing of the half-halt. The changes were better, but I was bound and determined to continue to refine my seat, and half-halt timing! I was able to continue to work on my position and effectiveness on my own horses and had one last ride on the GP horse before I left. It was so rewarding! I could sit in the saddle and half-halt the frame higher while keeping the horse more engaged. And my arms were not sore! 😊

The position learnings also stemmed from riding without stirrups. Something I am committing to continue in my riding. Jaimey and Tina both ride without stirrups regularly. This hits home another important characteristic of a coach – they coach using the same methodology they use when they ride. Which is why I learned just as much watching Tina and Jaimey ride as I did when I had lessons on my horses. Plus, I wanted to burn Tina's position into my brain to see if I can someday look even half as good on a horse!

Gaga, Iko, and I were at Stoney Lake for two months. The timing flew by with the first month mainly focusing on building our training base of alignment and connection. But because of that, the quality of gaits increased significantly and then we were able to focus on developing our lateral work and gaining confidence in all the movements. Iko arrived with a sketchy flying change, and we are now schooling the

PSG with work on the half-steps. Gaga arrived with somewhat of a “tranter” (canter with a weird trot rhythm) and now has expressive flying changes (so much fun!) and a proper connection (hallelujah), along with the solid beginnings of piaffe and passage.

Upon arriving back home, I have already noticed my more effective position and enhanced riding fitness on my other horses. I am more confident in the training system and have many more tools in my toolbox. But most importantly, I have a better feeling!

I cannot thank Jaimey and Tina enough for being such great coaches and life role models (did I mention they have two young children, run their training/coaching business, ride a swack of horses every day, maintain the farm, and have fun doing it all!). Plus, they play the best music in the arena and make a pretty yummy Glühwein! Being at Stoney Lake Equestrian was incredibly inspirational and I hope to be able to go back again soon!

I also want to send a big shout out to the ADA and its local dressage groups, especially EAADA and PAADA. Both have been instrumental in providing support, financially and as a community, for my sometimes insane dressage goals. Without all the clinics, event organizing and community engagement, none of us Alberta riders would have the opportunities to train with high calibre coaches or compete.

One final recognition to my incredible parents for their continued support, and to my friends for reaching out and connecting while I was in Ontario. It was always nice to get checked up on and receive messages of encouragement. It really does take a village!



Gaga enjoying one of the many trails at Stoney Lake



The Wizard



The Wizard at the sugar stand - the horses loved their sugar treats during and/or after a ride!



Team photo! (photo credit: Daniel from Ottawa)