



How I Saddled Up In The Sun

Stephanie Reese's account of the Bobbin Hollow Farm Adult Saddle Seat Clinic in Naples, Florida

The winter break was in full force – saddles were gathering dust, trainers were taking much needed vacations, and the show horses were enjoying well-earned playtime. But for thirteen ladies from around the country, early January meant a long weekend of riding hard, literally sweating off those holiday pounds. When the weekend was over, muscles were sore, bodies were aching, and exhaustion was setting in. Okay, my New Year's Resolution was to stop being so dramatic – what we really did was spend a weekend at gorgeous Bobbin Hollow Equestrian Center in Naples, Florida. And while we did ride several times a day and we were sore, the theme of the weekend seemed to gravitate toward making new friends, finding a few things out about ourselves, and enjoying the hospitality of the staff at Bobbin Hollow...and catching a few rays!

Back in October when I made the decision to attend the Saddle Up in the Sun Adult Riding Clinic January 11-13 at Bobbin Hollow, I knew very little about the Henry family, or the Morgan horse for that matter. In fact, I wasn't sure that a clinic at a predominantly Morgan barn was a great fit for me. What I found was a great mix of Saddlebred and Morgan riders, a barn full of wonderful horses of both breeds (including a couple of Saddlebred Rescues) and instructors who have a unique mix of experience to bring to the table.

Bobbin Hollow Equestrian Center is rich in tradition, and the history behind this family and facility is long. Woody Henry serves



The driveway leading to Bobbin Hollow Equestrian Center is a welcoming sight!



The staff of Bobbin Hollow



as the owner and trainer at Bobbin Hollow and spends his days working alongside his daughter, trainer and instructor Lark Rene Henry. Lark's education and credentials are impressive, and she has enjoyed the honor of being the 2006 People's Choice Instructor of the Year. Rounding out the staff includes Lark's mother, Louise Henry, who serves as Head Recreational Instructor, Ellen Patterson, as an assistant instructor, Suzanne Donovan, as center manager, and Wilman Garcia, as head caretaker. Follow me as I share my three day journey in the sun at this state-of-the-art facility!

Day One:

After arriving at the host hotel the evening before to a lovely welcome bag full of information about the clinic, I hit the hotel breakfast early on Friday morning hoping to meet some of my fellow clinic-goers. Kentucky jods and boots aren't something you regularly see in a Florida hotel, so my new friends were easy to spot. After customary introductions and a quick breakfast, we headed out for the short drive to Bobbin Hollow.

We were met with a gorgeous facility right in the middle of the Naples area urban sprawl, complete with a palm tree lined driveway. Lark Henry introduced herself and sent us off with a Bobbin Hollow staff member for a quick tour of the facility.

The food was certainly a highlight of this event. A light breakfast with tea and coffee was available each morning and really helped to kick-start our day. After everyone had had their first cup of coffee, Lark began the clinic by giving us the schedule and the lay of the land, so to speak. We broke up into groups of three or four riders and moved through various "stations," each focusing on a different aspect of riding.

The first station for my group was a lunge lesson with Lark. This was simply for her to get the feel for our strengths and weaknesses so that the remainder of our weekend could focus on areas of improvement. She took pictures of us sitting in the saddle from various angles, and then the actual riding began. The lessons were very basic, from mounting and addressing reins, and moved up through elasticity in the arms and the feel of the horse's mouth. After each of us had donned our helmet and gotten a little dizzy on the lunge line, we moved over to driving.

Woody Henry was our driving instructor, and he had his hands full, since two of the four in my group had never driven a horse! The Bobbin Hollow grooms had all of their talented show horses harnessed up, and we each took turns driving a world class Morgan horse. Having driven before, I took this opportunity to hear tips from a different voice and really enjoyed the quick drive. The two "newbies" in our group did wonderfully for their first time, and both said they wanted to do more driving! Maybe we'll see a spike in driving classes this year...

Our final ride of the day was another lunge lesson – this time bareback with a vaulting surcingle. Now, I've seen vaulting exhibitions, and I was a bit apprehensive that we would be actually turning around on the horse and bouncing up and down from the ground. You can imagine the relief I felt to see the first rider in our group do nothing of the sort. Rather, we used this ride to really get in sync with our horses, to feel their every movement.

It was on this ride that I fell in love. JD is a paint horse who has the most amazing "sleeping" trot and an equally lovely canter. I quickly found out that if I wasn't in sync with JD, he would tattle to Louise Henry, Lark's mother and our torturer in the vaulting. This first vaulting session told me that I needed to relax and trust my horse. After some fun, no-handed riding, at the canter no less, it was time for lunch. I was secretly wishing I could spend more time with JD!

Again, the food was spectacular, and we were treated to a lovely Greek salad and sandwiches. It was a great combination with the horse chat that went on throughout the meal. After lunch, the groups finished up their rides, and we had a chat with Lark's aunt and former trainer and judge, Marsha Shepherd. I was fascinated as I listened to Marsha's stories. Afterward, we all took turns asking her various questions. Marsha judged me several times when I was an equitation rider, and she was excited to hear she was one of my favorite judges and had given me several blue ribbons! It probably isn't a common occurrence for judges to hear praise – but Ms. Shepherd was one judge under whom I looked forward to showing.

Once the riding was done and all of the horses were put away, we headed out



Terri Dolan prepares to ride with Marsha Shepard and Lark Henry.



My sweetheart JD shows Sherri Nelson the ropes in vaulting.



for a quick cleanup effort at our respective hotels before heading over to Bobbin Hollow client Mary Adams' condominium on Bare Foot Beach in Bonita Springs, Florida. The view from her lanai was breathtaking, and the hospitality was warm as we all shared more horse stories and lamented our riding struggles of the day. Our first day ended on a great note as we enjoyed the company and delicious dinner.

Day Two:

Saturday morning started a bit earlier and I noticed the breakfast crowd at the hotel was smaller than the first day. All of us were certainly feeling the effects of three challenging rides on Friday, but that did little to quell the enthusiasm over coffee on Day Two.

We each rode three times on Saturday, with some riders having privates with either Lark, Louise or groups with Woody and very special guest instructor, Bonnie Byrne. A few lucky riders rode with Marsha Shepherd, who had promised her niece that she would volunteer some of her time to the clinic. She also had her elegant Marsha d'Arriaga custom suits displayed and did personal consultations with riders looking for new riding apparel in 2008.

My first ride was a private with Lark on a nice little Morgan mare who challenged me to keep pushing her. She was different from the game show horses we are used to riding; she really only wanted to work as hard as I did. If I got lazy, so did she. So, once again I was riding a tattletale - no slacking allowed here! But Lark really helped me to open up my upper body and relax, making my transitions and support of my horse's mouth much easier.



Mary Adams, Susan Harris and Peggy Councilman try their hand at synchronized riding.

Ride number two of the day reunited me with my sweetheart, JD. What a kind horse he is, and he is just as steady as the day is long. In the haste of switching horses and tack, JD missed his martingale, but the ride was nonetheless fun. In this ride, Jane Owens of Indiana and I rode together with Woody Henry. After prerequisite rail work and our attempts at equitation with a figure eight, Woody had us ride side-by-side at the trot around the ring, seeing how closely together we could ride. JD didn't seem to mind any of it, but Jane's mare did not want the little spotted gelding so close to her and had a very disgusted look on her face. She reluctantly tolerated our attempts at circus riding! When Woody asked us to ride side-by-side at the canter, we both laughed and wondered who might end up on the ground first. After learning to rate our horses and judge our partner's horse, we were cantering small circles together.

The day finished for me in back vaulting with JD. He seemed unimpressed to see me again, and I figured he might pack my saddle for me if only he had opposable thumbs. But he nicely worked the lunge line and allowed me to work with Louise to diagnose some of the problems I was having in the saddle. With Louise's help, I learned that a badly broken leg I suffered several years ago had developed some bad habits in me. She helped me feel my weakness and learn to rebalance myself. It was the "aha!" moment of the clinic for me. If I had gotten nothing else from this clinic, this revelation with Louise was worth the whole trip.

We trotted with no hands, we cantered with no hands, we cantered with my eyes closed with no hands, and we worked at all the gates as I held my left leg under myself. JD tolerated all of this and would even slow his gaits when he felt me getting off balance. If only all of the men in my life were this perceptive!

A lovely, healthy lunch was again included in between riding sessions, and Bobbin Hollow scheduled a massage therapist for everyone at the clinic. This young lady, Victoria Eagle, was heaven-sent and was a very popular person throughout the weekend. One of the



Mary Adams



A bald eagle takes flight over Naples Bay during the sunset cruise.

school horses donated his stall to her efforts, and I ended my day with her working out the stress my upper body had endured for the past two days. She told me I was flexible, and that is about all I remember since I was nearly asleep in a matter of moments!

Just before leaving for the day, Bobbin Hollow's resident physical therapist, Niki Varveris, spoke to us about posturing and exercises we could do to improve our riding. From the pictures that Lark took on Day One, she coordinated a personal evaluation for each of us which included strengths and weaknesses in our position and specific exercises we could use to improve our riding. She explained the evaluation to us and promised to deliver them by the end of Day Three another added bonus to an already successful clinic!

As the day was coming to a close, we headed back to once again clean up before our evening entertainment. Then, we headed to downtown Naples to board the Sweet Liberty, a 53' sailing catamaran. We sailed out of Naples Bay on our way to the Gulf of Mexico and enjoyed the beautiful homes that line the shore along with a lovely Florida sunset. Our captain was a wealth of knowledge and answered our questions almost as quickly as they popped into our heads, all the while pointing out the local wildlife, which included dolphins and wild parrots. The highlight of the evening, however, was definitely the start of the cruise when we noticed a bald eagle sitting at the pool of one of the homes on the shore. The captain circled the boat around so we could get a better look, and we watched as the eagle flew up into a palm tree. After a few moments he took flight and we were treated to a close up view of this majestic bird as he soared across the bay. What a treat!

After the lovely sunset cruise, we went in small groups to enjoy dinner in downtown Naples, a great way to end the day!

Day Three:

After checking out of my hotel, I headed over to Bobbin Hollow for the final time. We each had one more ride, and Lark did her best to accommodate special requests from all. I was lucky enough to ride with Marsha Shepherd on a lovely, Morgan mare named Pearl. Pearl liked to get down to business, so she and I got along well. It was a treat to ride with Marsha, and I really enjoyed picking her brain about some of the things I needed to work on. After our ride was complete, Marsha pronounced me ready for a new show horse after a good "winter's work!"

We wrapped up the clinic by trading cards with all of our new friends, reviewing our personal profile with Niki, the physical therapist, and saying goodbye to Bobbin Hollow. The hospitality I experienced was beyond what I would have asked, and the staff at Bobbin Hollow really went above and beyond to accommodate our every need. Caretakers, Wilman Garcia and Enrique Calderon, are two of the best I've been around, and Wilman always seemed to be right there when I was just about to look for help.

I highly recommend this clinic to anyone looking for a challenge. It comes with excellent instruction, along with a little burst of sunshine in the otherwise ugly winter. After all, how can you beat 75 degrees and sunny in January?

I think I can speak for my fellow attendees in saying that we left Naples ready to get down to business as we all prepare for the upcoming show season. Armed with new ideas, techniques and fresh encouragement from Lark and all of the instructors, 2008 looks to be a bright year for each of us. A special thank you goes out to everyone at Bobbin Hollow Equestrian Center for this clinic.

After changing clothes and loading everything into the car, I slipped down the alleyway to say my goodbyes to JD. I was greeted with a low nicker that warmed my heart – here I had spent all weekend thinking our love affair was one-sided. He might have been saying "good riddance," but I am going to pretend he said "I'll miss you." Until next year JD...



The gorgeous sunset over Naples