

A Day in the Life of an Equestrian DiSE student athlete at Hartpury College



Dear Diary,

My first experience of a DiSE camp at Hartpury to which we could take along our horses was extremely memorable.

I live right on the South East coast, so I drove up on Tuesday afternoon so that my horse and I could get settled in.

All of the girls were on the yard early the next morning so that they could go to breakfast and be ready to all meet in the classroom dead on 10am – or as near to 10am as equine students can get!

First up was a catch-up with all my friends who I hadn't seen for a while and, of course, a catch-up with our assessors. My lovely assessor is international dressage rider and BHS Stage 4 senior coach Claire Moir.

That morning, we had a saddle-fitting lecture with Steph Bradley – an independent qualified saddle fitter – focusing on saddle symmetry and how we, as riders, can affect and alter the fitting of a saddle and the way that it moves on the horse.

We looked at videos of horses trotting up in slow motion and focusing on the asymmetry in the panels of the saddle, and differences between foam saddles and flocked ones.

Steph made us all very aware about how the horse's scapula needs to be allowed the freedom of movement in front of the saddle, and we also discussed people's preferences for monoflap or dual flap saddles and how they sit differently and have different pressure points on the horse.

One of the best bits was when Steph wanted to demonstrate the importance of rider straightness by inviting one girl, taking on the role of a horse, to give a piggy-back to another student.

They had to walk in a straight line towards one of the assessors, to show the difference it made when the girl who was the 'rider' adjusted her weight slightly.

The girl giving the piggy-back was thrown completely off balance.

Steph then explained that this is exactly what happens to our horses when we are slightly uneven as riders, it unbalances them and encourages them to compensate, which then in turn encourages asymmetric muscle development, especially in young horses!

Following the saddle-fitting talk, we attended a lecture by renowned performance psychology coach Charlie Unwin, on the topic of psychology in sport.

Charlie, who has worked with athletes and teams from numerous Olympic and professional sports, helped us all realise that looking after ourselves is just as important as looking after our horses. He broke it down into four main headings; communication, nutrition, mental and physical. In each category, we had to write down what we were doing well and the areas in which we could improve.

Lots of it came down to dealing with pressure and nerves at competition. Charlie explained that rather than trying to ignore or forget about nerves, it is more effective to embrace them and think everything through.

I know that writing everything down has really helped me, especially having a set frame of mind before I go into any competition.



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After lunch, we were out on the horses for a pole work/jump lesson with international showjumper and BS level 3 coach Emma Slater.

We worked on leg yielding over poles and adjusting our distances between uprights in order to create a canter that resembles a spring which can be shortened and lengthened without losing the engagement of the hindquarters.

For the next half an hour we swapped and did a bit of flatwork with Jonquil Hemming, a FEI European Pony Eventing Team coach for over 15 years.

We worked a lot with the trot, movement within the stride, from an extension to a collection to encourage the hindquarters to come underneath the horse and allowing the front end to come up, meaning the horse was working correctly over its back.

After we put the horses to bed, we went to the gallery to watch the last of the DiSE dressage students running through their Junior European tests.

I am really sad that we have had to do most of our camps on Microsoft teams, because of lockdown, but I have still benefited so much out from the two years that I have been on the DiSE programme and it's opened many doors for me.

So much so, in fact, that in September I am going to do a degree in Equine Science and Coaching and my BHS Rider Pathway and Coaching exams.

Georgia Thompson

Eventing rider on the 2019-21 DiSE Cohort