**Don Jessop Natural Horsemanship Clinic at Ardara Farm on August 7-9**

You could say, that I didn’t quite know what I was getting myself into, but I like natural horsemanship, and I was looking for something to do with Maire. We needed to do some activities to get us thinking together and enjoying life.

Don Jessop is from Montana and his program is called Mastery Horsemanship. Throughout the clinic we would learn about the Four B’s – Boundaries, Bonding, Bravery and Basic Skills.

The clinic started with a group session each morning from the ground. After 90 minutes of ground work, we took a short break to saddle up (If you were comfortable doing so) and then did mounted work which consisted of lots of transitions (I would better call it changes). In the ground work, we taught our horses to move their haunches, move the shoulder, and backup when we shook the lead rope. For me the hard part was keeping myself in place. Learning these movements allowed us to establish the first B – Boundaries. Just like kids, horses perform better when they know what is expected of them and where they are supposed to be. The clinic used bomb proofing to help establish the boundaries and teach the horse to spook in place. We can never make a horse completely bomb proof, there’s always going to be something to set them off, but if they learn to spook in place, we can stay in the saddle. Looking and staying on the line of travel was allowed. Each horse was presented challenges of different types (Umbrella, tarp, plastic bags, etc) and yes, we knew they would react, but they were required to stay out of our space and stay in place. If they moved, we moved them back by moving the hips or the shoulders or backing them.

In the group mounted work, we concentrated on transitions. He wanted us to do 100 transitions in the warmup. Not dressage transitions, but more like changes. Walk, stop, back, walk, turn the shoulders around the haunches, walk, stop, back, walk, turn the haunches around the shoulders, walk, turn around without using your legs or body – that’s 11 changes, keep going, make their minds concentrate on you, challenge them, halt, reward, when they’re good, let them know. We were never bored, and if we ever felt it was too much, we dropped out to the side area and worked on what we needed until we felt that we could return. Don worked with the side group frequently to help them and he explained what he was doing to help them, and what boundaries he was setting for their horse.

Each day was slightly different, and we reviewed the previous days skills and added more to the building blocks that we were learning. He introduced us to bridleless riding and explained how he trains it, and showed us some liberty work. There were several times when he got on our horses to demonstrate a point or clarify the work we were doing and I was impressed with how the horses reacted to his clear and precise language.

Since I was having trouble getting the right lead canter, we concentrated on that in our private lessons. In his terms, Maire was swinging her haunches out and then getting the left lead, so we had to do some exercises to control and manipulate her butt. Since I was not having any luck, he got on her, and after a few minutes, he had it. I resorted to some dressage and a smaller circle that kept her bending and softening and we got it. Day 2 we repeated and asked for more canter, not just transitions, and day 3 after we had the canter transitions we worked on bravery with the tarp. I noticed that she would allow me to put the tarp on her and rub her with it, but when I got on, it was a different story, so we had to reinforce the boundaries when mounted, and wait, allow her to breathe, and ask for more. She was accepting the challenge and doing very well.

I will say, I didn’t expect as much as we got from this clinic. On the second day, I already noticed a calm and accepting look in her eyes, and she was enjoying the clinic, and looking forward to the activities. Yes we had our issues at the entrance from the barn to the indoor when mounted, but, I think she’ll handle it much better at the George Williams clinic next month. I’m beginning to get excited about doing clinics with Maire, and challenging her and myself to do much more.

