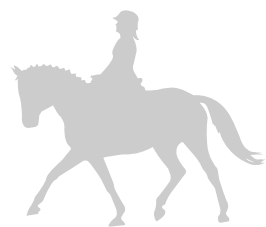


A Day with a Duke

By Richard Shellene

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY for a morning drive in the country and the scenery of Parkland was picturesque with the lush green grass of manicured lawns and verdant trees that lined the roadway. As I turned off the main road and turned again towards Pine Hollow Equestrian Center, a majestic stallion galloped back and forth across a field enclosed by white fences.

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Right: Head trainer David Blake and owner Gwen Dvorkin





I pulled up to the largest of three barns and walked past a row of stalls to the office where I was greeted first by a small white pup and then by Doreen Panico, Pine Hollow's business manager. "Welcome to Pine Hollow," she said warmly.

This premiere riding school and equestrian center covers 17 acres and includes several riding rings with Olympic and International quality footing installed. Doreen suggested I watch lead trainer David Blake ride in the main ring while she retrieved someone to give me a tour. The ring was expansive and completely covered to protect rider and horse from the torrential rains or blazing sun that all of us in South Florida face.

I was introduced to trainer and stable manager Adrian Griffin, an affable man with

a decidedly Irish accent. As we walked the main barn he detailed the different aspects of the stables. "This, the full care barn, has 34 stalls not including the stalls we have for tacking and washing. We typically have between 65 to 80 horses boarding with us at any given time between full care, standard care and our private boarders barn," he explained.

We hopped into a green four-wheel utility vehicle called a Gator and zoomed down the road to the building known as the Lesser barn. "This was the original barn when Pine Hollow was first built. It's also where a lot of the horses for the riding school are boarded," Adrian said as we pulled up. Trainer Valerie Baez met up with us and introduced me to a beautiful brunette... named Duke, the horse I would be riding.

A Pine Hollow steed proudly wears their colors.

It's been a good 20 years since I've truly ridden a horse, so I had all sorts of questions for Valerie. I was immediately stumped when she asked what kind of saddle I was used to. "Western?" she suggested tentatively and I nodded in return, thinking of the heavy leather saddle with some sort of horn that I had gripped in a white-knuckled past. "Well, you'll be using an English saddle," she continued, "a hunt seat saddle. It'll be different but you'll be fine. Duke is a great horse to get back into the saddle with."

Valerie has a strong base of experience, but I trusted her judgment based just on her demeanor and interaction with the horses. Pine Hollow is one of only ten equestrian centers in Florida of its size and is unique in having both a riding school and a large barn for show jumping. There are currently 15 horses associated with just the riding school to help train riders of all ages.

Adrian gave some directions to a couple of stable hands to prep Duke for my ride later. As we climbed back into the Gator, Adrian shared some personal feelings. "These guys [the stable hands Alex and Orlando] are important because they live and breathe these horses. More times than not they know something is wrong with the horse before a trainer or rider does. They all but sleep with the horses. Sometimes when necessary, they do that as well."

We drove past the last barn, or the Boarder barn, where private owners lease stalls and often manage the care of their own horses (partial or standard care service is available). As we drove past a tranquil fountain by a wooden gazebo, I spotted a woman putting a horse through the paces of hunt seat riding. I noticed the difference between what I knew of Western style riding and what she was doing. She rode a lot more forward and high in the saddle instead of leaning back into it, as I had learned.

Adrian called out to trainer and rider Katie Brown, who would oversee my education, as she rounded our end of the ring. She asked for a few minutes to finish up her session, so we took a walkthrough of the Boarders barn before heading back to the Lesser barn where Duke was almost ready for me with his tack



on (the equipment a horse wears for riding, such as the reins, bit, saddle, etc). I put my hand out towards him and he leaned his head in almost as if giving me permission to touch him. I quietly stroked him for a few moments, bonding with my soon-to-be-steed.

Katie came riding in and dismounted, ushering her equine into a stall to be untacked and then brushed down. "It really is a unique place, aside from having both a large show barn with a covered ring and a riding school. The fact that we have paddocks for the horses to wander and graze is a huge plus for anyone that boards with us." A paddock is a large grass area that is used for the exercise of the steeds. Most stables either do not have them so close or charge

Top: Pine Hollow's campriders taking a walk.

Bottom: The beautiful view from the gazebo.

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“With a beginner, the horse must be forgiving; and it has to be honest. What I mean is a beginning rider will tend to make a lot of mistakes, the horse must be willing to accept that....” David Blake, lead trainer

*Parkland Hunter Derby
with all Pine Hollow riders (l
to r): 1st Place Hunter Kava,
trainer Katie Brown, 2nd Place
Madelyn Ruskin, 3rd Place
Maggie Huntley, 4th place
Katie Miller.*



a significant amount for their usage; Pine Hollow does not.

Katie explained the different styles of riding, between jumping, hunt seat, and equitation; I was impressed with her extensive knowledge. She is a Palm Beach native who lived next to the Wellington ESP (Equestrian Sports Productions) show grounds on her mother’s farm; her mother played polo and kept a barn full of polo ponies and jumpers. Katie also lends a hand with Pine Hollow’s younger riders who are part of the IEA (Interscholastic Equestrian Association), an organization founded on the principle that any middle school or high school student should be able to participate in horse shows, regardless of their financial status or riding level. “This past weekend we had our first IEA Show of the season, which we hosted in Wellington. We were first over all with our middle school team, and our high school team was third, along with numerous individual wins as well as one of my students, Emma Valley, winning the sportsmanship award,” she said passionately.

Finally, the time came for my ride on the majestic Duke. A small step stool was placed in the ring as Duke was brought out on a lead. Thankfully I swung one leg over without incident or harm to my pride as I settled into the saddle. “Feel a difference? A hunt saddle is more about balancing yourself on the horse,” said Adrian. “You’re also closer to the horse. It’s not at all like a Western saddle which is much more like... riding in an armchair as it were.” He directed me on how I should sit and hold my feet in the stirrups.

I was taken for a bit of a walk on the lead as I got comfortable with the gentle giant. Duke was patient and understanding as I shifted this way and that, or pulled the reins too soft or too hard. “You look great up there. You both seem a really good fit for each other,” Katie called out as she rode past the ring I was in. I’ll admit the compliment gave me a little extra boost as I sat up a bit straighter in the saddle. A vision of riding like a noble lord amongst his retinue just before a hunt popped into my head. Then came the realization that I probably looked like a city slicker out of a comedy movie; but I didn’t let that deflate me in the slightest.

Duke, Adrian and I went for a walk around the property, as we talked about our mutual experiences abroad as well as those stateside. Eventually we

came back to Duke’s home of the Lesser stable and I dismounted smoothly “like a pro.” Again I was grateful for a non-catastrophic incident.

We took a stroll back to the full care barn and walked in on lead trainer David deep in thought as he watched a video on his laptop. When asked what he was doing, he said, “Thinking really hard about this horse we have our eye on and whether or not to buy it.” David explained how a lot of thought is put into selecting each horse Pine Hollow purchases, either for themselves or for a client. The horse’s overall suitability for what they have in mind for it, whether it’s show jumping, hunt saddle, or a beginning horse for training new riders. It is not just an evaluation of the subject’s physical attributes of strength, speed and movement, but also of the horse’s mental attributes.

“In the case of a horse for beginners, or any horse, their mental well-being is important,” David explained. “With a beginner, the horse must be forgiving; and it has to be honest. What I mean is a beginning rider will tend to make a lot of mistakes, the horse must be willing to accept that.” David himself came up through the ranks as one of Ireland’s top young riders, winning his first Senior International Grand Prix at just 17 years old. In a very competitive sport that is not just the rider but also

how well he clicks with the horse, that is no small task.

My morning at Pine Hollow Equestrian Center was now over, and I pondered how the trainers and staff not only do their individual jobs well, but how they are truly passionate about what they do. For each of them, it is not just a career but a lifestyle, and one which they want to share. Whether you want to learn to ride just for your own enjoyment (or your children’s), or want to ride competitively, beautiful Pine Hollow is equipped for every choice. Personally, I’ll be going back to at least visit Duke. ●

To learn more about **Pine Hollow Equestrian Center Riding Academy, Boarding or Complete Horse Care programs**, or to inquire about Pine Hollow Equestrian Center’s exquisite inventory of European imported Ponies, Hunters, Jumpers or Equitation Horses for sale and lease **call (954) 757-1119 or go to www.pinehollowflorida.com**.