

Kayla Smith and CS Ostentations+ / Submitted for USDF All Breeds Award 2021

If there is one thing that Austin (CS Ostentatious+ /) has taught me in the last two years is stay grounded. We all have that one horse that keeps us on our toes, super talented, but has a quirk or two that maybe we can't breakthrough to.

Prior to bringing Austin back to the show world, I had been running on a high of moving from a struggling Training/First level rider, by acquiring a horse that in 5 short years brought me up the levels to Prix St George and schooling higher. This horse was dependable, hardworking, always ready for a lesson or show, loving new challenges. Then there was Austin, who is half Arabian, Shagya cross, equally athletic, but I had given up on him several years ago. Austin was insecure, easily frustrated by the dressage, stressed out at horse shows, so I turned him out to pasture with the idea that I'd give him a complete break from everything. Several years went by, and I wondered – had enough time lapsed for Austin? Had I given up on Austin too soon? Was it me, or all him? Maybe we could just start some light work on him, just see what happens.

My whole goal for Austin was restart from scratch. A do-over. To actually enjoy riding him. There was no pressure to attend a show or be perfect. I tend to be a perfectionist, and with Austin, I couldn't push for perfection or he'd blow up.

We began with the basics, lots of walking and trotting. I learned to talk more out loud, reassuring him, petting him. We'd work awhile, take a break to let him relax mentally before he got frustrated, then return to more work. It seemed

to be working, and we had begun to establish a bond. It was lots of slow, steady work, but I felt we were making progress.

We began working with a trainer who understood the issues we were facing. I needed someone to watch us, advise me that we were going in the right direction. We couldn't push Austin. After seeing me get bucked off one day, she understood that Austin needed his little breaks in the lesson to process things in his mind, slow down some, and once we picked up on the lesson again, things went better.

After almost a year of steady riding and lessons, I felt he was ready to start showing again. Naturally I was nervous, wondering if he'd revert to his old days at shows where he'd pace nervously in his stall, scream, or bolt. I had to remind myself that as insecure as Austin is, I had to be there for him, to encourage him and keep him going forward, to give him a break in the warmup before going in the arena to compete. It was just him and me, no other horse and I had to encourage him for his efforts. We gained confidence in each other, which led to him taking care of me a couple of times in the show arena.

For the first time ever with Austin, I was coming out of the arena with a smile on my face. Not because our test was perfect or we were scoring high, but he was trying to please me, and more important, he liked it. I was proud of myself for what we were accomplishing, that special relationship I had with my other horses.

With the new relationship, I quickly became more aware of when Austin was more uncomfortable or not happy. Before each show he received a chiropractic adjustment. This made all the difference in the world in his attitude and ability to work.

We didn't push for a world title or higher levels. It was more important to get through a few shows and have good rides rather than take on the world.

Austin had developed Cushings and for his last show of the year, it was incredibly hot and humid. Getting him through that last show was not easy, but we hit that centerline each time and he gave it his all. He achieved his remaining points for Arabian Horse Association Achievement award, Legion of Supreme Honor.

After two years of working with a less than ideal dressage horse with his conformation, Austin made me realize why I love dressage, the training, the bonding, those moments when things just click. It was all about giving Austin his chance to prove himself, and he surpassed my wildest dreams.