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## Teen with Autism Kaylin Bowman Thrives in Dressage

Written by **Betsy LaBelle** - In **Dressage** - Wednesday, January 10, 2018

Growing up with autism, 13-year-old Kaylin Bowman continues to triumph through the sport of dressage. Diligently training for the last five years with Allison Stai at Rocking M Stables (RMS) in Dallas, Texas, last fall the remarkable youngster won the South West Dressage Club (SWDC) Region 9 Championships for Intro B. She competed in the Training Level Test 3 and Training Level Freestyle. They also competed in the 2017 USDF Dressage Seat Medal Semi-Finals for ages 13 and under and placed second which will earn them an invitation to go to Chicago next year for the Seat Medal Finals. "She just continues to progress," Allison acknowledges proudly. "She's become a really nice little rider."



Connecting right away with Kaylin, Allison steadily mentors approximately 20 youth riders each year from age 3 to age 18. Since autism has a spectrum disorder that includes little eye contact, difficulties with language and social interaction, working with Kaylin at first required a particularly mindful approach, "While she had a bubbly personality, she had trouble communicating. If I asked her a question, I wouldn't get an answer. I realized those first few days that if I grasped her hand and guided her to do something, she'd do it. That was her starting out point. Not long into the program, she made progress like all of the others in the program here." Since those beginnings in the sport, Kaylin has made enormous strides. "We started with a couple of school ponies. And over the years, her personality has completely changed. She is totally fearless. She doesn't tend to overthink things like many of us do. In some ways, she has an advantage."

When Kaylin was 8, a friend of her mother's suggested Rocking M Stables for her daughter. Lisabeth Bowman, Kaylin's Mom, had a good friend whose child was training at Rocking M where they have a youth curriculum program that runs in conjunction with the school year. "My friend," Lisabeth elaborated, "suggested that my husband Hil and I think outside of the box of a special needs equine therapy program." She continued, "At that time, we wanted to see if an equine therapy program might be beneficial for her. She's on the spectrum and so



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we were naturally thinking special needs riding. My friend suggested we think outside of the box and consider the program at Rocking M Stables. Children with special needs sometimes get stuck in always going to special needs programs. With my friend thinking outside that box she asked us to let Yvonne and Allison at Rocking M tell us what Kaylin could or couldn't do. And right away they said that she could do it all."



Lisabeth continued, "I really hadn't seen her connect with anyone other than close family members or her therapist before starting at Rocking M. It has been great to see her emotions develop. When she started at age eight, her language was just starting to emerge. She had very limited language. She'd regressed to almost zero language like at age 3, so we were working hard to gain it back.

She had some sentences, but very limited." She continued remembering, "They were mostly demands for her wants and not wants. She didn't have any much emotional language to use effectively yet. Expressing emotions verbally was difficult. When she first got on a horse and started trotting, she started giggling. We would ask her what she was thinking, and she would answer that she wanted to go faster. It was great to see her expressing what she wanted. She really wanted to learn the next step."

Nervous for their daughter at her first show, Kaylin's parents watched her succeed through all the steps to complete the USDF Intro A class and win first place in a class of 6 riders. Kaylin's Mom shared, "The hardest part for a person with autism is putting together steps for things like being asked to go from one room to another and placing something on a table or the steps to brushing one's teeth independently. So competing in a dressage test has been extraordinary. We were so nervous. And she has had no problems, only progressions."

Kaylin is the one who pushed for more and told them that she wanted to do more showing. Seeing her enthusiasm for wanting to do more, they bought her a horse she's owned now for two years now. The horse they bought is a registered paint mare named Wannabea Painted Robin, which they call Robin. "For the Region 9 Championships this year," Allison shared, "Kaylin competed in Intro B and won the class whereas last year in that same class, they were in ninth place. They also competed in the 2017 USDF Dressage Seat Medal Semi-Finals for ages 13&under and placed second earning them a ticket to be invited to go to Chicago next year for the Finals."

Lisabeth said, "At Rocking M they are about the entire riding experience. She learned to do it all from grooming to tacking up to picking the hooves, everything. She takes complete responsibility for taking care of the horse. The whole experience has blown us away. It's been amazing to see her invest all the time into her riding. She has become very sympathetic and empathetic to the horse, her partner in riding." She continued, "We started really slow. She had been consistently moving forward in her progression. We've never witnessed any regression. And since we started with the horses," Lisabeth emphasized, "it's only been positive progress. It's just amazing to watch her. Every year we talk about the progress. Whatever is happening with the horse, the kinetic movement, she is tuned in. The connection and the movement of the horse does something to her."



Allison works with Kaylin in lessons twice a week on Monday and in a group lesson on Saturday. Allison said, "She has a private lesson on Monday and a group lesson on Saturday. She rides on her own three days a week and on the other days, she comes to groom, hand grazes and spends time with Robin. She's at the barn every day. We have several kids her age here, and she's become friends with all of them. Always supportive and positive, she's very connected. It's exactly what her parents wanted for her."

Lisabeth shared, "Now, she is indistinguishable from her peers when on her horse. When Allison has her in a group lesson with four other girls, she can ask them all to do the same thing. Allison doesn't need to say, 'Kaylin, I need you to do something.' You used to have to say her name to get her to do something, but she has generalized out of that. It's been amazing to see her grow that way. She can take directions, and she controls her emotions better. The horse we purchased two years ago is awesome. Of course, there have been things she has had to work through. Robin tested her a few weeks after we purchased her by halting and refusing to go



forward. A year before, Kaylin would have pitched a real fit, but she's learned to process what is going on. She remembers experiences with other horses, and she will listen to Allison on what to do when she questions something. Allison has been amazing in telling her to keep going and not to give up."

### **The Program - Rocking M Stables**

German board certified Pferdewirtschaftsmeisterin Yvonne Kusserow became head trainer at Rocking M Stables in 2008 after working at the State Equestrian College in Vechta and studying the complicated USDF/USEF Dressage Tests. After moving to the U.S., Yvonne noticed that young riders were not progressing up the dressage levels with the same understanding as Germany's youth riders whose training emphasized a more comprehensive foundation of classical horsemanship. [www.rockingmstables.com](http://www.rockingmstables.com)



Merging Germany's testing structure with America's USDF/USEF rules for dressage level test requirements, Yvonne and Allison created a highly effective, understandable, and enjoyable annual training program for around 20 young riders between the ages of 3 and 18 that coincides with the fall to spring school year. The Rocking M Stables' successful riding program also involves grooming, horse care and safety, a systematic structure that follows each horse's biomechanics to include rhythm, relaxation,

contact, impulsion, straightness, collection, and the German method of testing to teach young riders up the dressage levels.

### **Kaylin's Journey through the RMS Program**

"She's completed the highest level of the level testings," Allison explained. "The levels are a pre-showing preparedness curriculum. The highest level is the 3+ and now she's moved on to the show team."

Allison shared, "When Kaylin started advancing and expressing an interest in showing, I did look into Special Olympic type options, just to explore what types of opportunities might be out there for her. In the end, we all decided that we see no reason why she can't do the same shows that the rest of us do, so we decided to give it a shot. It turns out she definitely can hold her own out there."

Allison said, "There are two main components we feel that have influenced Kaylin. One is that she has the social connection that she and the other kids share the same ups and downs in their riding journey and the second is the horsemanship skills that have been combined with riding. From day one, she went into a step-by-step routine of having to groom her assigned pony. She learned how to catch the horse, tie it up properly and safely, and how to pick the horse's hooves, groom the horse, and more. She learned how to connect with a horse and develop a relationship on the ground before getting on it. There have been times when I started to help with something, and she will say to me, 'no, that's my job,' and I step back and let her do it." Lisabeth confirmed, "Her horse has become her partner."

Although one of the most difficult aspects of autism is putting steps in their proper working order, Kaylin will correctly guide her horse into an arena, circle the ring, say hello to the judge, and announce her name and riding number and then wait for the bell to begin. "She has nailed all of the steps to participate in a show," Lisabeth excitedly describes. "She's very proud of herself that she's learned and doing it well."

### **Kaylin's Regular school**

Kaylin is in a small therapy school called Spectrum Academy directed by Nikki Moses who Lisabeth calls the Autism Whisperer. Nikki said she contributes the riding and Kaylin's work with the horses in helping her with connecting to others and showing empathy and affection. She also said that this stands out the most because this connecting is one area of autism is often difficult for learners to acquire and it takes a very long time to teach. Horses have also attributed to Kaylin being more disciplined and encouraged responsibility.

Lisabeth shared, "All parts of Kaylin's life have been affected by the riding, the physical, the social and the learning. She is always making progress. Her comprehension skills continue to move forward at a rapid pace. I truly believe that the kinetic movement does something in sending messages up to the brain. Things really connect. Her cognitive skills have improved dramatically since starting riding."

Kaylin's family acknowledges that Rocking M Stables has helped Kaylin so much. "I cannot say enough thanks to Allison for all the kids she works with," Lisabeth says admiringly. "Kaylin may have autism, but everyone has their stuff, their hiccups, and their hurdles to get over. She's patient with every single one of them. Whether anyone has a fear, frustration or a learning block, she walks all the way through it with them, and they all come out the other side with success. It's amazing to see someone with so much love for these kids."



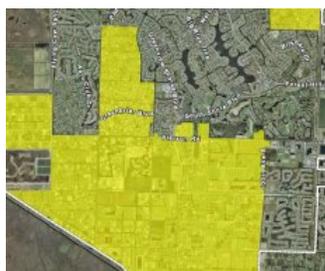
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