



A Lifetime of Knowledge

Growing Up With Pony Club

By Susanna Rodell

What do Karen and David O'Connor, Gina Miles, Amy Tryon, Phillip Dutton, and many other eventing superstars have in common?

They all started off in Pony Club. Most of them credit this unique organization for giving them a solid foundation for their eventing careers. "It's a great place to learn the basic skills," says David O'Connor, a graduate of Redland Hunt Pony Club in the Maryland Region. "It teaches overall horsemanship—that's the important part. Taking care of the horse and learning to ride in lots of different ways."

For many in the eventing community, Pony Club is a familiar institution, as much a part of the landscape as Boy or Girl Scouts or 4-H. But for competitors who come to the sport as adults, and for kids who work only with an individual trainer, Pony Club is something of a mystery.

A worldwide organization, the club is known in the U.S. as United States Pony Clubs, or USPC, and has more than 12,000 members in 600-odd clubs around the country. Pony Club originated in England to train young people to foxhunt, and the

BELOW: Amy Tryon, as a 12-year-old proud member of the Valley Green Pony Club, riding her older sister's off-the-track Thoroughbred Bon Ami. **NEXT PAGE BELOW RIGHT:** Years later, Tryon and her longtime partner Poggio II went on to win the individual bronze medal at the 2006 World Equestrian Games in Aachen, Germany.

NEXT PAGE ABOVE RIGHT: Stephen Bradley joined Pony Club as a teenager, and learned valuable skills which helped he and From place eighth at last year's Rolex Kentucky CCI4*.



Courtesy of Amy Tryon.

“The big thing Pony Club gave me is structure. It teaches self-reliance, how to safely care for a horse, and to be self-sufficient.” - Amy Tryon

organization has spread across the globe with clubs in 30 countries.

Members can be as young as five years old (individual clubs get to decide—many children start at age seven) and they can now remain until age 25. Members proceed through the levels of the club by passing examinations called ratings, which test riding ability, horse knowledge, and basic horse management skills. To pass the D-1, the lowest rating, a member must be able to control their equine partner at the walk and trot, name a few parts of the pony and its tack, and perform simple tasks such as grooming and tacking up. To pass the traditional A, or highest rating, a member is expected to ride at Intermediate level—having already passed an examination requiring highly sophisticated veterinary and horse management knowledge.

Recently Pony Club has added specialty ratings in dressage and show jumping that don't require all the skills needed for eventing—but only at its higher levels. To get to the club's midlevel rating, the C-2, a member needs to be able ride on the flat and jump in an arena and in the open to approximately Novice level.

But it's the other skills—the ones that fall under Pony Club's rubric of horse management—that set USPC's graduates apart.

“The big thing Pony Club gave me is

structure,” says Olympian Amy Tryon. “It teaches self-reliance, how to safely care for a horse, and to be self-sufficient.”

One way the organization does this is through its competitions. Pony Club rallies are unlike ordinary horse shows or horse trials. Members compete in teams appropriate to their rating level, and they are judged throughout the rally not just on their riding but on how well they are caring for their mounts.

Furthermore, parents and coaches are not allowed in the barns. They are not even allowed to speak to the kids while they are competing for fear of being charged with unauthorized assistance. Rally teams do, however, have designated coaches who are able to assist the riders warming up for jumping competitions. However, no coaches are allowed for dressage. Competitors have adult rally officials to consult if needed, but from an early age they are expected to rely on each other. They get penalty points if their stalls are dirty, if they don't have required safety and basic veterinary equipment handy, if their tack rooms are disorganized, if a horse is tied unsafely, or if their tack is not clean. Standards rise with ratings. Part of the competition includes a formal inspection. A D-1 will pass inspection if her pony is clean and his hooves are picked out. By the time a mem-



Joshua A. Walker/Photo

“For me, Pony Club was huge. I didn't come from a horse family: Pony Club was perfect for me—it helped me learn the day-to-day things I needed to take care of horses.”

- Stephen Bradley

ber gets to the C levels, horse management judges will be going through manes and tails looking for dandruff.

Pony Club is particularly valuable for young people with the eventing bug whose families aren't horsey to begin with. One such kid was Stephen Bradley, who with his mount Brandenburg's Joshua came in fourth at Rolex last year and eighth on From.

Bradley started off riding Western. “Then one day a friend let me borrow an English saddle, and I fell in love with jumping,” he recalls. Already 14, he got a late start. He soon joined the Loudoun Hunt Pony Club in the suburbs of northern Virginia. “For me, Pony Club was huge,” he says. “I didn't come from a horse family. Pony Club was perfect for me—it helped me learn the day-to-day things I needed to take care of horses.”



Peter Nixon/Photo

Pony Club: Nursery for the Olympics

Do you want to ride in the Olympics? Then join Pony Club, advises 2008 Olympic eventing silver medalist Gina Miles. There's no better way to prepare.

"A Pony Club rally is like a mini-Olympics," Miles says. "You get the experience of working as a team, preparing the horses, and working with a team coach you may not be familiar with."

Miles believes the USEA and Pony Club need to work together to prepare young eventers for high-level competition. "There's a trend for the USEA Young Rider programs to be separate from Pony Club," she observes, "but they need to



Gina Miles proudly shows off her individual silver medal from the 2008 Olympics.

work together more.

"Look at the generation of eventers who are competing now. Most of them have come up through Pony Club. I'm afraid the next generation may not have that Pony Club background, and we're going to see the effects of that."

Miles is a Graduate A Pony Clubber, but that A did not come easily. She failed the test twice before passing it on the third try. She says she feels young riders learn as much from their failures as from their successes, and Pony Club, with its exacting standards, gives kids a chance to fail.

"There's nothing wrong with going to a test and not meeting the standard," she argues. "You learn what you have to work on, and you go back and try again."

"I think that really embodies what the sport is about. There are highs and lows. The road to improving as a rider is a long one."

And once you have that coveted A rating, Miles warns, it's only the beginning. To a young D Pony Clubber, the A looks like the pinnacle of equestrian achievement. In fact, she says, "The A is the beginning. It says, now you've learned enough to go out and learn to ride."

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Photo courtesy of Phyllis Dawson.

Bradley, the O'Connors, and other top eventers also point to the growing concern for safety in eventing. Despite the high-profile



cases that have caused apprehension in recent years, David O'Connor points out that most of the people who get hurt in the sport are adult amateurs who may not have ridden as kids, or who may have only ridden in a ring before coming to eventing.

"My generation grew up foxhunting and riding by the seat of our pants," remembers veteran eventer and trainer Phyllis Dawson. "You do learn instincts [riding in the open] that kids don't learn riding in a ring." Pony Club, with its requirements for riding and controlling a horse in the open, helps young riders prepare for the rigors of cross-country, where most serious accidents happen.

"It wasn't like stepping into a new world. I was very used to [eventing], and very comfortable with it."

- Caitlin Heller

ABOVE and LEFT: Phyllis Dawson credits much of her success in the eventing world to her long hours in the saddle as a horse-crazy child, getting to know her ponies and developing the skills that became second nature for her as an upper-level rider later in her career. BELOW: Seven-year-old Caitlin Heller and her pony, Stockings, attended their first D-1 Pony Club rally. NEXT PAGE ABOVE RIGHT: Heller and her current mount, Starry Night, competed at the 2007 USPC Championships and Festival held at the Kentucky Horse Park.





“Pony Club is a great way to get started in eventing,” Dawson asserts. She has a highly regarded working student program and she notes that if a kid falls in love with eventing, they’ll compete with or without Pony Club, but students who come to her with a Pony Club background are well-rounded and know more about basic horse management.

The professionals all agree that Pony Club is particularly crucial for kids whose parents may not be horse-savvy, or even very supportive. “It’s most valuable for kids who don’t have access to family support,” agreed Dawson.

Caitlin Heller, a 19-year-old Pony Clubber from New York who events at Training level, says her Pony Club knowledge doesn’t just help in the barn. When she started eventing four years ago, she remembers, “It wasn’t like stepping into a new world.” Because of her experience at Pony Club rallies, Heller said, “I was very used to [eventing], and very comfortable with it.”

Caitlin, who participated in her first year in Area I Young Riders program last year, admits that among young eventers, Pony Club is sometimes viewed as uncool. “It got to me a little when I was younger,” she says, “but now that I’m older I can see that Pony Club has done a lot for me. I don’t care—I think it’s awesome.”

At horse trials, she notes, “If you go into a Pony Clubber’s tack room, they’re a little more organized; likewise, when they go into the dressage arena, their horse looks great. Pony Clubbers have it all together. All they have to worry about is getting the horse to do what they want it to do.”



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My First Pony Club Rally: No Moms Allowed!

By Susanna Rodell

It must have been 103 degrees in the shade. We dropped the kids and their ponies off at the barn and the horse management judges told us we could leave. My daughter Ruby was nine; it was her first Pony Club rally. And the rule was at Pony Club rallies: no moms allowed.

Luckily, I had some veteran Pony Club parents around me who reassured me that the kids would be just fine. And they were. Over the course of the weekend, Ruby fed and watered her pony, groomed him to get ready for her formal inspection, coached a teammate on how to wash her pony's tail, (and she got an "Exceeds Standard!") and successfully jumped two courses, all in the blistering heat, and all without any input from me.

Looking back, we have no idea how she and her teammates placed that weekend. It doesn't matter. What we remember is the double experience: mine, of letting go of my kid, and hers, of relying on herself and her teammates to look after their ponies and compete without hovering parents telling them what to do.

There were adults around if they really needed help. One compassionate official, watching Ruby trudge up the hot, dusty hill to the barn, gave her a piggyback ride. She never forgot that act of kindness—another experience that wouldn't have happened had I been involved.

In the intervening years, I've been a Pony Club DC myself, and broken in countless parents to the Pony Club Way: Let the kids sort it out. Your kids are more competent than you think, especially when they function as a team. It's not about the ribbons (though ribbons are nice)—it's about the experience. It's about learning how to look after your pony, and being safe, and figuring out what you need to work on.

I've clapped my hand over a mom's mouth as she tried to shout instructions to her daughter in the ring, reassured another that her child would figure out where the course walk was. Countless times I've gratefully walked away from the barns, knowing it wasn't up to me to make sure everything went okay.

Now Ruby is 18, still in Pony Club and a

serious eventer, struggling to juggle school and working for lessons and finding time to train. Like so many young eventers, she has brought along an off-the-track Thoroughbred, learning as she goes, and dreaming Rolex dreams.

None of this would have been possible without Pony Club. It allowed us to learn together to be good, safe, responsible horse owners. It provided Ruby with a level of instruction we couldn't have otherwise afforded, since top clinicians often work with clubs for a fraction of their normal fees. It gave her role models in the older kids and a structure for measuring her own abilities as she worked her way up the ratings. It taught her to negotiate reasonably with adults when her team felt unfairly judged at a

rally. And recently it has allowed her to assume a leadership role with the younger kids, something she relishes.

At horse trials, like a lot of parents, I'll often play the role of groom, but mainly that means being an extra pair of hands. But I can also confidently send her out to compete, knowing she has the knowledge she needs.

Last summer Ruby went to her first Young Riders camp. All week, she reported, you could tell the Pony Club kids from the others. They were the ones sitting around after lessons scrubbing their tack and showing their friends how to bandage their horses or adjust a bridle.

I asked Ruby to tell me what Pony Club has done for her. Here's how she summed it up: "It taught me to always put my horse first, and how to do it." 🐾



At age nine, Ruby Rodell and her pony Chevy attended their first Pony Club rally.

Courtesy of Susanna Rodell.



Now 18-years-old, Ruby successfully competes in Area 1 events with her mare My Fair Lady V.

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