

HORSBACK RIDING IN KATY

Equestrian Resources
Close to Home

Written by Noreen Stavinoha



Photo by Meredith Kohut

Before signing up for lessons, visit any barns you are interested in



Grace Hancock takes some time out with Chica Rica at Circle Lake Ranch

Emily Drew pictured with her horse Cappy



Celise Eberle wondered why everyone was laughing hysterically the first time she rode at Blue Ribbon Meadows in Katy. “My former coach had taught me to ‘stand up like a sail’ every time I brought the horse to a halt, so that’s what I was doing. The coaches at Blue Ribbon had never seen anyone ride like that, and I guess I did look pretty funny,” she says. “So my first lesson was to unlearn that bad habit.”

Galloping toward a Goal

Horseback riding wasn’t the first sport Eberle had tried, but it was the one that won her heart. So much so that as a senior in high school, she enrolled in the distance learning program of Texas Tech, so she would have more time to practice her riding skills. Her goals are set high. Eberle hopes to compete for the world championship in 2010, and the Olympics after that. She is becoming an expert in the three major horsemanship areas of dressage, show jumping, and cross country with the help of her coach, Barbara Jacobs. “One of my most satisfying moments was when all that Barbara had been telling me about dressage finally clicked, and I understood what it was about,” says Eberle.

Another of Jacobs’ students, Lauren Malone, is also a college student and began riding when she was 9. “Riding taught her responsibility and matured her at an earlier age,” says her mom, Robin Malone. “I had none of the problems of an irresponsible teen that some parents have, and I credit the discipline learned in riding for that.”

Sheltering Rescue Horses

While providing riding instruction to about 50 students is its main function, Blue Ribbon Meadows is also home to about 20 rescue horses. It provides a comfortable habitat for victims of abuse, starvation, and neglect. When possible, those horses are adopted out, but many of them will simply live out their lives grazing in the pastures.

Letting Riders Fly

A few miles to the south, Layne Spitzenberger and her sister, Lacey Spitzenberger, have operated the Circle Lake Ranch in Katy since its opening in 1998. “I’ve taught 2,000 people to ride without one broken bone,” says Layne. “My sister works with the beginning riders and gives them a really beautiful foundation, and when they are advanced, I let them fly.”

Letting them fly leads to perfecting skills that win competitions, and Circle Lake Ranch riders have the ribbons to prove it.

Chloe Benning has been riding her horse Santana since she was 7



Circle Lake Ranch photos by Marissa Hagonnett

Maddie Kerr enjoys taking care of her horse at Circle Lake Ranch





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Of course, there are those who ride for fun only, and that isn't discouraged. Riders frequent the ranch anywhere from one year to several years, taking them through their schooling, and many come back after college.

The ranch offers lessons all year in both English and Western riding on horses that are chosen for their sweet personalities, and their summer camp is a popular activity for children ages 6 to 14. During their camp stay, the youngsters have an opportunity to show what they have learned to an audience of their parents at the end of each week. The course includes learning to care for the horse they are riding and learning to make equipment, or tack, changes.

A Passion for Equestrians

Sydney Rowatt, 11, takes lessons at Circle Lake and has been riding for four years. "I like overcoming stuff I've been nervous about," she says. She also enjoys bonding with the horse. Ten-year-old Maddie Kerr was really persistent about wanting to take riding lessons. "I wanted a horse when I was 2, and my parents finally let me learn to ride when I turned 6," she says. "I love competition, but I ride for fun, too."

Riding is a privilege for 13-year-old Chloe Benning, who has been riding at Circle Lake Ranch since she was 7. Because keeping her

grades up is a condition of continuing to ride and keeping her horse, she has learned to work very hard. "Riding has given Chloe a lot of confidence," says her mother, Virginia Benning. "It brought her out of her shell of shyness and has given her the desire to try anything with her horse."

Most of those young competitors will eventually go across town to the Great Southwest Equestrian Center to compete.

Last year, the center hosted a total of 61 different horse shows and looks forward to at least that many in 2010, according to its public relations manager Elise Beckstett. "As the premier horse show facility in the southwest, it hosts events in almost any equine discipline including hunters and jumpers, dressage, reining, and team roping on Welsh ponies, miniature horses, Arabian, saddle horses, Palaminos, and quarter horses," she says.

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—Virginia Benning

Although learning to ride can take some time, with the determination to succeed and a love of horses, your child could someday find themselves competing at the center in shows, too.

Whether riders are just beginning or have been riding for years, horses offer an unmatched companionship that many enthusiasts find hard to live without. **KM**

NOREEN STAVINOHA lives in Katy with her husband and miniature schnauzer and loves to tell the stories of interesting people.

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