

ABC Camp 2016

ABC camp – Building Blocks for Pony Club’s Future

By Cyndi Rowat

“It was awesome! I am definitely coming back next year!” Sums up thirteen year-old Megan Burke’s opinion of this year’s Alberta South Region’s ABC camp, a three-day intensive camp hosted at the Millarville race track grounds. Hot and tired, Burke and her friend Kenna Keenas of Wheatland Pony Club were all smiles sharing some of the highlights of their week.

The ABC camp is in it’s second year and boasts extraordinary coaching opportunities for pony club members in the region who are tested C level and above. Organized by parent and Regional show chair, Jackie Rawn, the event was attended by thirteen eager members. “I wanted to run ABC camp because I think it's important to keep our older kids engaged.” says Rawn, “These are the kids I hope will take over for us, so if we can keep their love for Pony Club strong they'll be ready to step into our shoes when the time comes.” While Rawn is thinking about the future, these young riders are busy soaking up the knowledge, the friendships and the sun while building their confidence and their independence.

Both Keenas and Burke are C level senior members in their club and much of their club responsibility is in helping their younger members. “ This was a chance to focus on us. Kind of a reward for us.” Explains Burke. “It was a step up, without coaches and parents. No little kids. It was all on us. It was weird. We always know what to do, but now, we got to do it.” Both girls were excited to train with eventing coach Sandra Donnelly, the camp’s show jumping coach. “I like how she teaches and I got to jump really high.” Grinned Keenas. Donnelly is an A level Pony Club Alumni as well as the highest placed Canadian eventer from the 2008 Olympics and runs Donnelly Eventing out of Alborak Stables west of Calgary. “I leaned a lot this week.” shares Burke, “I learned how to balance my horse before the fences.” “I learned not to twist my body, chimes Keenas, “I knew it, but I didn’t know how to fix it.”

The dressage coach, Shelley Malbeuf of Freedom Farms East of Calgary assisted the young riders in establishing better performances out of their horses in the flat phase of the camp. Malbeuf brought her wealth of experience as a competitor and FEI level trainer to the table. Each time out of the ring with Shelley brought a new level of understanding, some tired legs and some big smiles as riders discovered new levels of competence.

On the final day, riders trailered to Eversfield Equestrian and Keenas was excited about that part of the journey... “We got to load our own horses!” That struck a chord, because allowing these young pony clubbers the chance to do for themselves is an important component of the camp. At Eversfield, riders trained with Glynis Barnes, an A level pony club alumni with many international credits, who challenged each level rider on their highly acclaimed cross country course. Barnes provided experienced instruction over a variety of obstacles including drops and banks and brush jumps.

The pony club program is all about employing safe methods, good horsemanship, sportsmanship and developing a competent horseman from the ground up. So valuable time with coach Kathy Wayne sharing her experience in correct lunging as well as HA level pony club alumni Emily Harris mindfully educating members on correct bandaging, wound care and other topics were a perfect fit. It is this development of the independent and self-reliant equestrian that makes ABC camp a unique and valued experience. Members are responsible for themselves and their horses throughout the three days.

The budding athletes were fuelled with nutritious meals and were provided with their schedules, which they were ultimately responsible to get to each session on time. The schedule included two mounted riding instructions per day, lunging sessions, a cross-country session, stable management sessions as well as some fun activities and a special speaker and free time to lounge around with new friends and care for their horses.

Sixteen year-old Brooke Fielding of Water Valley, AB is a C2 level rider with the Cochrane Pony Club. For Fielding, the highlight was her group members, "They were super supportive, and I really liked switching horses. It was nice that my friends would willingly switch horses for the dressage". Riders B and above are required to switch horses and certainly Fielding learned much from riding with riders her senior. "I really enjoy learning. The Physio-therapist session was a highlight for me." She says referring to an evening session with physiotherapist Sandra Sokoloski from Summit Sport Physiotherapy in Okotoks. Sokoloski got these athletes thinking more about their position and themselves as a big part of the team equation.

For those thinking of coming to camp next year... "It is about the interacting with your horse and your friends. It is the best of both worlds." Suggests Fielding. "You need to be prepared. It is a long week."

The Millarville Track and Agricultural Society grounds were the perfect backdrop for building these incredible memories and truly would not have been possible without their huge support.