

Life Lessons Learned Through Pony Club

By Eric G. Dierks

When I think of all the life lessons I have learned, and still will learn, I have the horse to thank. When I think about how to treat my life teacher with care, respect and love, I have Pony Club to thank.

I first got the bug watching my Dad work with horses. Whether he was riding, long-lining or leading them, the horse had an eye and expression that when asked to do something, they wanted to please him. I wanted to be like Dad not just because any son does, but because he exemplified patience and horses loved him. I was hungry for knowledge and Pony Club appeared to be the vehicle.

I was around 12-years-old when I was exposed to Pony Club – and I thought I was hot stuff. When I appeared for my first lesson in what I thought was my Olympic demeanor, I received a lecture on my safety, how I led a horse and was asked questions in relation to the care of my tack. My first thought was, “Maybe Pony Club is not for me.” Then I saw the girl-guy ratio and thought, “I’ll give it a try.” I just wanted to get on and ride, jump jumps and go venture out on the trails, but there was much to learn that I was unconsciously incompetent on that would make me a better horseman - not just a rider. I was humbled that there were many little things that lead to bigger consequences for my safety and my horse’s well being.

Entering at the “D” level was tiresome, but necessary. Though I may have frightened many of the parents with my green mounts, I was having a blast learning with my peers and looked forward to a future goal of getting the elite “A” rating. Every Saturday I looked forward to mounted lessons from Jurgen Roesch. We were taught independence and taking accountability for the care of our equine partner. I had no idea that I too would be following in their footsteps.

I really enjoyed learning about the horse inside and out. From veterinary care, nutrition, pasture management, conformation and lameness and much more. From barn, to horse, to trailer, to pasture management, there was no stone unturned in the development of a true horseman. It was my goal to learn the best possible care for my horse.

As Pony Club members we were invited to go on foxhunts and taught etiquette and respect among the members of the hunt, though sometimes I felt we had more control over our horses than the field themselves. Camps were also a big hit. Learning from guest clinicians, testing our independence taking care of our own horses and the



Eric and his wife Trayce at their Renovatio Farms in Tryon, North Carolina.

Photo by Beth Grant - bethgrantphotography.com



The Dierks' farm in Tryon, North Carolina is a reflection of their Pony Club upbringing, where the pursuit of excellence, safety and fun are not just priorities but a way of life.

Photo by Beth Grant - bethgrantphotography.com



Eric on the cross-country course at The Fork Horse Trials in Norwood, North Carolina, 2013.

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There were many lessons learned on and off the standard. I failed my share of ratings, but I always came back to try again, acknowledging the fact that I was not competent with just memorizing correct responses. Taking accountability for actions that happen around you is an important lesson in life.

Pony Club had a big influence on me of how I deal with pressures and opportunities in life today. From the age of 12 to 21, I was exposed to every emotion a teenager can encounter. Not only did I have my friends to lean on, but I had my horse. There is something about the horse that makes you know he's always listening.

Today, I can say I'm a graduate "A" from Fox River Valley Pony Club. My wife Trayce, also a graduate "A" from Greenville Foothills, own and manage Renovatio Farms in Tryon, North Carolina. Teaching is not a job for me but a love of mission. There are so many life lessons learned through horses that sometimes get blinded by expectations from them in the show ring. I like to learn the lesson from the horse and do the competition as a team partnership rather than a vehicle. When taking the time to care for the horses inside and out of the show ring, and learning more about the responsibilities we owe them while in our care, one can't help to notice how much he wants to please us in return. It's not just about being competitive, but about being moral and sensitive to your horse's needs. Besides, your horse is the friend you told all those secrets to you wouldn't tell anybody else. What if he were to speak?

About the writer: Eric Dierks is a graduate "A" from Fox River Valley Pony Club and he was Long Listed on the eventing team for both the 2002 World Equestrian Games and the 2004 Olympic Games. He and his wife, Trayce, own and train out of Renovatio Farms in Tryon, North Carolina, where the pursuit of excellence, safety and fun are not just priorities but a way of life.

occasional shaving cream fight to test the boundaries, were some great memories missed today. A Pony Club rider learned to come to a show more than prepared. We made tack rooms for a team of four out of the back of our two horse trailers and didn't care if it was pouring rain or freezing cold. We had each other. Besides, there was no such thing as bad weather, just bad preparation.

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A Pony Club Education

Take a look at top American riders and you will find that many started their riding careers in Pony Club on the backs of much-loved horses and ponies. Pony Club has statistics to back this up, as 51 American Olympians are Pony Club alumni.

The United States Pony Clubs continues to educate today's young riders and a new Equine Educational Exhibit is making its way across the country. The educational display offers 17 educational stations made of authentic equine components such as bones from a real horse and actual grooming and tack items. Factual information is presented with mobile convenience displaying interactive equine activities focused on safety for both horse and rider.

The Equine Educational Exhibit, funded through grants from The International Horse Show and USA Equestrian Trust, shares the love of horses with youth and adults across the country. The educational display is designed to share the passion of horses through interactive fun, and to provide participants with an experience leading to future interaction with horses and ponies.

For more information about the exhibit, or to find out about hosting the exhibit at an upcoming event, contact marketing@ponyclub.org. Find additional educational information on riding and horse care, or help support equestrian education by visiting www.ponyclub.org.



Hmmmm... What part of the horse did I dig out of the bone box?

Photo courtesy of the United States Pony Club



A visitor learns bandaging and proper leg support to protect her horse's legs.

Photo courtesy of the United States Pony Club