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Old People's Riding Club members don't let age keep them on the sideline

By Susan Craton
The Enterprise
Thursday, July 29, 2010

It was a steamy Saturday morning as the players, visibly sweating, waited for the soccer game to begin. They walked to and fro, eyeing the ball in the center of the field -- some giving it a tentative nudge, as if to try it out -- until the president of the chapter, Robin Goebel of Lusby, began dividing them into two teams.

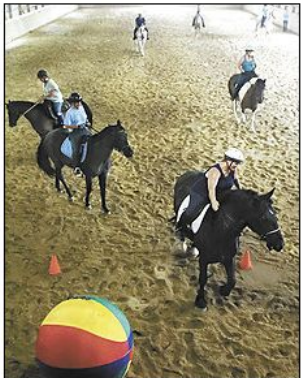
The goalies took their posts at either end; the others found their assigned places.

"Ready. Set. Go!" Goebel yelled.

But there was a problem: These were horses playing soccer. "Go" was not a command they understood, apparently.

Most of the horses stood stock-still as their riders urged them toward the ball. A couple gave the ball a reluctant sniff.

Plenty of whooping and hollering came from the riders July 17, however, as members of the [Freedom Chapter](#) of the [Old](#)



Kelly Smith, lower right, gives her horse, Nicky, a congratulatory pat after Nicky scores and ties an Old People's Riding Club horse soccer game at Little Cove Farm in St. Leonard on July 17. (Reid Silverman/the Enterprise)

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[People's Riding Club](#) gamely celebrated every step their horses finally took toward the huge beach ball, which served as a soccer ball stand-in.

"Good job, Gemini!" Monica Lynn, of Hollywood, yelled as her palomino pushed the ball forward. The game had no rules, except that the horses weren't allowed to canter.

Thus began the horse soccer match of the Old People's Riding Club.

The organization was created in Lothian, in 1998, by Hope Jacob as a way for people who were too old to participate in the United States Pony Club, a nationwide horse-riding group geared toward youth, to continue to be involved in riding.

When the club was formed, riders could participate in the Pony Club until age 21; the age has since been raised to 25. The Old People's Riding Club takes anyone age 21 and older. It has 24 chapters nationwide, three of which are in Maryland (the others are in Lothian and Bowie). Total membership is about 700.

The Southern Maryland chapter sponsors one or more mounted activities, such as a trail ride or cow-cutting clinic, herding a cow while riding a horse, or a soccer game, each month. It includes 34 members that range in age from 29 to 74.

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Shiela Haviland of La Plata is president of the national organization and a member of the Freedom chapter.

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"I'm a former Pony Club mom," she said. "It's an every-week commitment. The kids get to do all kinds of cool things. . . . You're sitting on the sidelines."

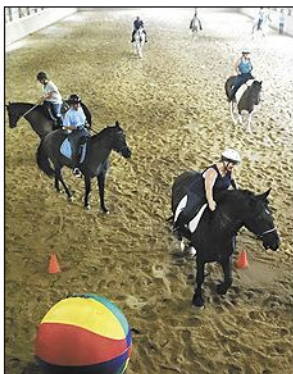
During the soccer game at Little Cove Farm in St. Leonard, 11 horses worked on overcoming their fear of the ball, as well as the stress of being around other horses. Some of horses adjusted well, while others struggled.

The riders worked with their horses, encouraged each another, and offered advice.

"It is a blast," Goebel said before the July 17 game. "We just laugh the whole time."

The match marked the second time the club had attempted soccer. The idea came from Rick Pelicano, a horse trainer in Pennsylvania, who uses games with a large ball to help horses become used to unfamiliar objects.

"While we have fun, we'd like everyone's horsemanship to progress," Goebel said.



Kelly Smith, lower right, gives her horse, Nicky, a congratulatory pat after Nicky scores and ties an Old People's Riding Club horse soccer game at Little Cove Farm in St. Leonard on July 17. (Reid Silverman/the Enterprise)

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Rita Riddile, who, along with her husband, Andrew, owns Little Cove Farm, is a newer member of the Freedom chapter.



"These are thoughtful horse people who are congenial and get along," she said. "These people are not focused on competition. They are not competitive horse people, and that changes the dynamic enormously."

As the soccer game progressed, several goals were scored, to the cheers of the human participants.

Marietta VanNatta of Lusby, riding T-bird, a 29-year-old appaloosa, and VanNatta's friend, Barbara Conner of Lusby, on Smokey, her blue roan, practiced with a ball before the match. By kickoff, they were all smiles as their horses showed confidence with the activity.

"I didn't ride for 40 years," VanNatta said. The club "is just a nice venue for people who've rediscovered riding."

Conner later gave one of the loudest whoops of the day when Smokey easily guided the ball into the goal. The members of her team cheered.

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