

They don't just horse around

By Joan Herman
Of the Emerald

The Oregon equestrian team loves to horse around — but that doesn't mean they're not learning.

Non-equestrians may think riding a horse is like driving a car: turn the key and take off. But it's not that way, according to two riders on the Oregon team.

"There's a definite communication between horse and rider," says former team president Kathy Meader. "Otherwise, you wouldn't be able to get a performance out of them. A horse knows when you're scared, when you're nervous. They are really perceptive to that."

"A horse is not going to do what you want them to do just because he's going to do it. When you get a good performance out of a horse it's because your communication is good. That's what performance is all about," Meader says.

Although this experience can be exhilarating, she says riding is not always like that.

"There's times when it hurts real bad. Your legs are just aching and it hurts to ride sometimes," she says. "People think it's a real easy sport. You just get on the horse and ride and the horse does all the work."

"It's not true at all," agrees Melissa Herron, one of the team's two coordinators. "It's definitely the combination (of horse and rider). It cannot be put on one or the other."

But both women say their love for horses makes it worth the effort.

"They're incredible beasts," says Meader. "If you compare a horse to a cow, you've got a much more intelligent animal. They're like dogs in a way because they're extremely trainable."

When horse and rider work together there is nothing else like it, according to both women. At a recent practice, the petite Meader guided a 16-hand, black thoroughbred, Sam I Am, gracefully over several jumps.

"It's just so thrilling," she says. "There's nothing else like it when you have a good performance, especially if you're on a difficult horse. It's very, very rewarding."

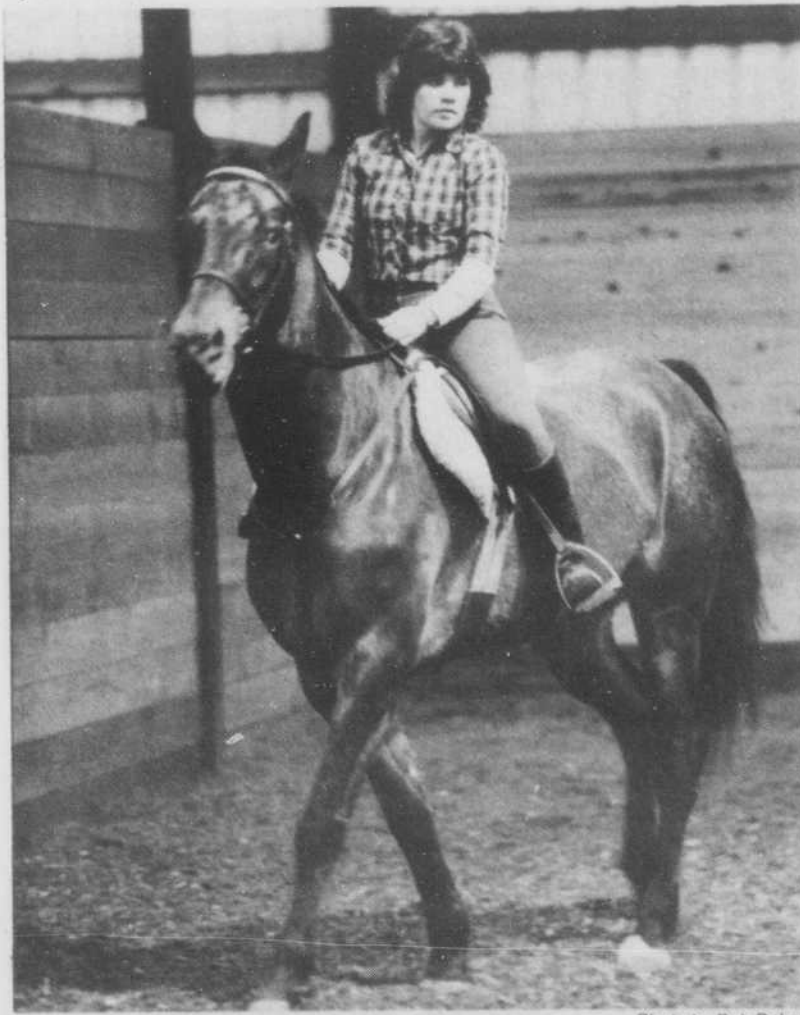
Unlike most teams which stress competition, Herron says the equestrian team is more interested in educating its team members than winning ribbons.

"Basically the team is designed as a learning experience, not a competing experience," she says.

Meader explains the team consists of two teams within a team: Don Kennedy and Betsy Soule of Foxridge Stables coach the English team and Sue Pruitt of Lakeview Stables coaches the Western team.

Both women stress that the team, which now has 19 members, is always looking for new members, and surprisingly, experience is not a prerequisite. Herron says competitions have classes for novice riders who have never won a ribbon before and because they are competing against other beginners, there is "no reason not to have beginners on the team," she says.

"I never had a lesson until I came to UO. I felt like I really knew horses well, but when I



Melissa Herron rides Sam I Am at practice.

Photo by Bob Baker

came here I realized how bad my communication was and how much I didn't know about horses," says Herron.

"As far as what we have to offer, it's endless," says Meader. "If you are the best rider in the world you can learn a lot. If you've never been around a horse before you're going to learn a lot," she says.

Both women expect their practicing to pay off when the

team begins collegiate competitions in the spring. They also plan to have several schooling shows with other stables around the Eugene area during winter term.

Until then, horse and rider will work many hours together attempting to achieve perfection.

"That's what's nice about riding," says Herron. "The challenge never ends."

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