

# Sports

## Community does not horse around when it comes to equestrian team

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Something special happens between children and their horses - and it becomes dear. The cost associated with horse ownership prevents many Valley children from having this experience - but thanks to the Illinois Valley High School (IVHS) equestrian team; horse-crazy students get the opportunity to learn horsemanship, and much more.

"Some of our kids never rode before and could never do anything like this, but they get to be on our team," said head coach Desiree Eddy. "It's so awesome for them and really helps keep them out trouble and doing something positive, staying on the right path toward their future. We go out and find sponsors who loan us horses so these kids can ride. But it's spendy. It costs \$710 to pay the fees for each kid. So I'm always really excited when local businesses and community members support us."

The equestrian team is constantly fundraising; and in the process, Eddy says team members learn how to talk to people and promote themselves: "Like at Shop Smart, someone will say they have a horse and end up talking with the kids and connections are made. This is a great life skill."

Working with horses also teaches empathy and confidence. When a 100-pound-girl learns how to handle a 1,000-pound-animal, she grows more powerful and is far less likely to ever become a victim. "I have one small gal now, Alia Parker," Eddy said. "When she started, she didn't want to do more than a walk - and now, she's out there running barrels."

"The team is involved in Western riding styles, though sometimes, we do English as well," explained Eddy, who's coached the team for 16 years. "We're doing barrel racing, poles, figure eights and keyhole - which is very entertaining. You run down into configuration shaped like a keyhole and you have to dash in-and-out without the horse touching the chalk lines."

Three times a year the IVHS

team competes against 16 teams in the Southern Oregon District, and if they place high enough, they go on to compete at the state-level, where five slots are allotted for each district. "It's a big sport in Oregon," Eddy said. "At state, you're competing against 60 top riders."

"Our first meet went really well," Eddy said. "We placed second overall in drills. Taylor Taylor took first in barrels, and Lily Schlabach took second in in-hand trail. And the team placed fourth out of 11 teams in the in-hand obstacle relay." The team also includes Alia Parker, Zac Parker and Kaylee Hicks.

At the team's second meet, Eddy said a horse was injured and had to be pulled from the competition, "and that tripped the team up. We just had one issue after another. But our third meet is in a few weeks and we're pretty eager to place. We want to go to state this year, and to qualify, we really have to perform and place in the top five - in the five classes where we're holding on. But we can do it."

That meet takes place at the Jackson County Expo, April 15-17. Admittance is free, and Eddy says Saturday will be the most exciting day. The competition starts at 8:30 a.m. and goes to about 4 p.m.

"Our team has been doing a lot better than last year," Taylor said. "We've come a long way. Our drill team is doing really good too. We're all like family, we're really there for each other."

Taylor, a 15-year-old freshman, riding since she was 10, also said the equestrian team teaches a wider range of "life lessons" than other sports. "You have to care for yourself, the team and the horses. There's more involved. But I don't know if the community knows about the team as much as they should," she added. "We don't have that many people attending our events and it'd be nice if more people came out and supported us. It's probably the most expensive sport at school, so we really need the community's help. Right now, we're looking for more sponsors to help us get to our third meet this year."

Schlabach's mother, Roxanne

Schlabach also wants IVHS to get behind the team more. "If the students and staff would attend some of the events it'd help with moral support and recognition of the sport. Also, this team helps the children learn responsibility. They must maintain a minimum GPA to participate and the children are responsible for the care, upkeep and feeding of their horses. Being on the team helps them to learn what team work is all about."

Needing a large arena to practice in, the team heads to Josephine County Fairgrounds. They also practice in the Barrel Bonanza Ranch arena. Huck and Holly Reese, who own that facility, donate the space to the I.V. team, because "they want to see our Valley youth rise in the sport," Eddy said.

"Being involved with the equestrian team has definitely changed me for the better," Lily Schlabach said. "I was rather placid and didn't know how to have fun with other people until I joined the

team. Since then, I've learned how to enjoy other people and to work as part of a team. This really brought me out of my shell."

Schlabach, 18, is a senior and has been on the team for four years, though she's been hanging out with the team for eight years.

"I love horses. I've had them since I was little, but mostly just took care of them," she said. "But when I joined the team I really learned how to ride. I was a big reader, and I still like to read, but now I like riding more. My own horse, Pistol, really lives up to his name. He's a Mustang in his third year of training. I also ride my coach's horse in some events that Pistol isn't really for yet."

After she graduates, Schlabach plans to attend Rogue Community College, and then, transfer to Oregon Institute of Technology for more training to become a dental hygienist.

Eddy and assistant coach Alicia Kinsey are grateful for the "awesome

support" they've received from community members and businesses, and particularly acknowledge Lavon Arnett from Double A Ranch Hay Sales; Kaylah Gilkey, owner of Rockstar Leather in Selma; Taylor's Sausage; Bridgeview Winery; and Rogue Truck Body, for helping keep the equestrian program afloat.

The team is always looking for more people willing to donate the use of horses, hay, feed and money. "And we'll work for it!" Eddy said. "We'll clean stalls; do yard work, chores and more. A lot of these kids, they're happy to give their labor - they just don't have the money."

"Looking back at all the life lessons these kids have learned through my time as coach, it's really worth it, because they take all these lessons into their lives. They're going to survive and thrive in this world because they know they have to work. They're not going to just live off somebody else," Eddy said.



(Courtesy photo from The Illinois Valley News)

Kaylee Hicks (mounted left), Taylor Taylor, Lily Schlabach, Zac Parker, Alia Parker and assistant coach Alicia Kinsey (standing).

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