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Extension program helps problem horses, novice riders

By Rosalind Jennings | Special To The Sentinel May 11, 2009



Eric Anderson works with riding students (from left) Rene Segraves of Leesburg, Wendi Miller of Umatilla and Shelby Ritten of Sorrento. (ROSALIND JENNINGS, SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL / May 7, 2009)

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LAKE JEM — Sorrento resident Alan Chandler's wife and daughter are experienced horseback riders, but not him.

This was his first time riding steadily, so he needed a course.

"I haven't made that connection yet. That's why I'm here," he said of his participation in a horsemanship program recently organized by the Lake County extension office near Lake Jem.

Eric Anderson and Dane Hovey from Xtreme Horseman, teaching in the Central Florida area, led the training for 13 riders. Anderson, 44, taught marksmanship in the Marines and has been teaching horsemanship to kids and adults for five years. Hovey, 52, has taught riding for all age levels, even toddlers, for more than a decade. He also enjoys retraining "problem" horses.

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Understanding horses and horse behavior is at the crux of their teaching, according to Sharyl Hyatt, president of Extreme Horseman who assisted during the training.

"This is the basics — the horse is your friend," Hyatt said. "You and your horse should move comfortably with one another."

Hovey stressed there's no point in training a horse without its rider getting trained, too: "It's not safe unless they both learn together."

Riders spent most of the day at Bill and Michelle Brown's private training

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Anderson reassured the group of both experienced and inexperienced riders that they would feel better about riding with enough practice and not to give up.

"Don't get embarrassed," Anderson said to the riders on the possibility of mistakes. "But I'd like you to stay on your horses if you can. Just try to stay on your horse."

Said Hovey: "This will be your first day doing some of the things we're asking you to do. If it doesn't work, don't get discouraged. Our goal today is to give you some opportunities for success."

Some training elements included understanding the horse bit, using body movements to steer and stop a horse, easing a horse's anxiety when confronting physical obstacles such as water and objects, and giving a horse positive reinforcement such as loving pats.

Another important part of it was respecting that horses are herd animals and like to follow one another.

Anderson explained to the group it will always be harder to get a lone horse to do something. So part of the class was getting the riders to do well individually as well as in a group.

Chandler said his only experience as a kid was riding on trails on rented horses where the horses followed one another in a long line.

"You can go behind another horse all day long," he said. "But try doing it by yourself, and it's a whole new ballgame."

The riders had to practice stopping, trotting and tackling obstacles. Sometimes the horses approached things together as a herd and sometimes individually. Sometimes the horses would balk at obstacles, and sometimes they would move through them.

When horse and rider passed an obstacle individually, without needing another horse to go before them, they got applause.

Bit training was also stressed in the training. Pulling up hard and strong on a bit constantly is not the way to ride a horse, Hyatt said.

"You're putting hard steel in their mouth, and when you pull back, it hurts," she said. "Their gums are as tender as ours. Don't take advantage of that steel in their mouths."



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