

Horseback Riding as a Sport

You won't hear Dad on the sidelines yelling "Get the Ball! Run!" But there's a competitive sport going on just the same. You might hear a trainer quietly coaching, reminding her student to check his lead, or to keep her shoulders back, or to use more left rein. What you're watching is horseback riding. It's a sport where boys and girls are on equal footing, so to speak. And when done correctly, it is great physical exercise.

Now you're probably saying, "I've gone horseback riding, and it's not that difficult." Well, these kids aren't just going for a ride, they're getting exercise, developing strength in their legs, arms and torsos, as well as coordination. And make no mistake, this is a team sport. You have to be in sync with your partner (the horse, of course) if you want to succeed.

In fact, many children who don't do well in traditional team sports (football, soccer, etc.) have excelled at riding. Perhaps that's because they can progress at their own pace, without pressure or humiliation. Many home schooling families use riding as their P.E. requirement. Others have opted out of public school P.E. in favor of riding, and some states even have high school equestrian teams. Colleges, too, have intercollegiate riding teams, and recently riding has become a NCAA sport at a few universities. It is the only sport where men and women regularly compete against each other.

What about different riding styles? "We use English tack for several reasons," explains Laura McEvoy of Rancho Saguario in Martinez. "The saddles are lighter and less bulky, easier for small children to carry, so kids quickly learn the responsibility of tacking their own lesson horses. And the English discipline is more versatile, giving them many options for growth. At the beginning stages, the basics of controlling the horse are very much the same, so a student can easily switch to a different discipline, such as western pleasure, if he or she so chooses." She should know. As a lifelong rider, and having spent thirty years as a professional trainer, Laura has been involved in just about every facet of the horse world. "I've focused on jumping because I find it both physically and mentally challenging. And it's a lot of fun!" she adds.

Sarah Lyness of the Orinda Village Horse Store points out some other advantages. “Growing up riding, showing, and spending time at the barn taught me responsibility, leadership, sportsmanship and respect. I also learned to work with others toward a common goal. It’s very rewarding, and I think it’s kept a lot of kids out of trouble.”

Many stables offer the option of competitive showing. “We go to about two schooling shows a month, and a few ‘A-circuit’ shows each year,” says Ms. McEvoy. “Showing is an option for kids, and adults, who want to use their skills in a competitive environment, but we never pressure them to do so. It’s also a good way for them to gauge their progress, and to observe what others are doing. And we do our best to make it fun and affordable.”

In short, there are many types of riding, styles of riding, “disciplines” to explore, but they all start with some basic riding lessons, something the whole family might enjoy together. And the side benefits are plentiful – new friends, stress reduction (you can’t interact with horses and stay stressed), mood improvement, life skills – in addition to the physical benefits. So the next time you consider sports programs, for your kids or yourself, think about horseback riding. There’s more to it than most people realize.