

A Horse Show Dress Rehearsal

*Pony Club “Horseless Rallies” Are Practice
For The Real Thing*

By Dawn Bellinger



There is no reason that “dress rehearsal” ponies can’t be adorable!

What if you could practice for your next horse show by going through all of the motions of competing but without your horse? Wouldn't you feel more prepared when you later competed with your horse? That's what we do in Pony Club at our “Everything But The Horse” (a.k.a. Horseless) Rally.

Our members set up their stall (with a stall card), tack room (for their clean tack), and feed room (with a feed chart). They dress in their show attire and go to their formal inspection. And, then they run through their dressage and stadium tests mounted on their pool-noodle ponies. The ring has a judge, an announcer, and a secretary who tallies up the scores – just like a real show.

It's just like running through a speech in front of a mirror with your golden retriever as your audience, or asking someone to read the other parts in a play so that you can practice your lines. Practice may not make perfect but it does give you a sense of ownership. Then, when it comes time to add the horse, you've already done everything else. You get an “I got this” feeling. It's especially important for our Pony Club members, who may be as young as six, to know what to expect.

All Pony Club competitions include a horse management component. Our parents (and coaches) aren't allowed in the barns. Instead, we have horse management “judges” in the barns who assess penalty points for things that are done wrong, but members can usually earn points back if they correct the error.

Examples of things that can be fixed include: a girth mark, a dirty bit, or no lead rope nearby.

Not having parents or coaches in the barns is a wonderful way for our young members to grow and develop confidence in their own skills and abilities. Teammates help each other and more experienced members mentor the less experienced, all under the watchful eye of the Horse Management judges.

We compete (or “rally” in Pony Club terms) in teams of three or

four riders and a stable manager, with one member designated as team captain. The stable manager is crucial to helping the team be on time for their inspections and rides. The team captain is usually the most senior and the only member of the team who can challenge a score or appeal to the ground jury. At our “Everything But The Horse” Rally, each team includes a “C Advisor.” These are experienced Pony Club members who have achieved their “C” certification who help teach the (usually younger) less experienced members.

The members who compete in the “Everything But The Horse” Rally have their “D” certifications or are “unrated.” Our certification system starts at the D level and goes up to the A level, with sublevels in between. Our D's are novice, C's – training, B's – intermediate, and A's – advanced. And, we offer many testing tracks: Horse Management, Dressage, Show Jumping, Eventing, and Hunt Seat Equitation, although Horse Management proficiency is required to progress in all riding

disciplines.

How do our members know what's right and what's wrong? One thing Pony Club does well is produce paper, and rules! We joke that even our rules have rules. Each discipline has a rule book and we have manuals for each level. All of our instructors and examiners use a national curriculum and standards of proficiency.

One of the best things about Pony Club is that you carry your certifications with you wherever you go. If you have your C-2 Eventing certification from Virginia and you move to Kentucky, you pick up right where you left off because it's a national program. In fact, it's international. Our older, advanced members participate in international exchanges with other Pony Club members from other countries, all at roughly the same riding and horse management level.

Our national certification system allows everyone in the industry to know exactly what our members skill and knowledge levels are. Our strong Horse Management program (a requirement for progress in the riding tracks) is acknowledged by all equestrians. We frequently hear top riders say they would trust a Pony Club member with any of their horses over anyone else.



Competitors waiting their turn.

Dawn Bellinger is an alumna and the mother of an HA alumna from River Bend Pony Club in the Virginia Region. She still helps River Bend and sits on the board of the Virginia Region and the United States Pony Clubs, Inc.



A setup and safety inspection is going well for this Loudoun Hunt team.