

Women pursue equestrian passion at Desert Hills ranch

MARC BUCKHOUT ~ MANAGING EDITOR ~ 6/6/2013

For those that aren't interested in horses the term dressage probably doesn't create much of a response unless they're fans of Comedy Central's The Colbert Report.

The comedian did several skits on then presidential candidate Mitt Romney's horse which was competing in the event during the Olympics.

Instead of simply a punch line the event is a passion for a group of women who spend much of their spare time at Carefree Farms off Carefree Highway and 7th Ave. in Desert Hills.



Along with dressage the 30 – 40 people that are regularly on the 17 acre property also work on their skills stadium jumping and cross country jumping.

“You come out here and once you come through the gates time stops. This is all you think about,” Karen Carns, a 57-year-old Anthem resident said.

Carns story isn't all that unique amongst the group with many that were introduced to riding in their youth and then return to riding after a long gap while they raised families.

For Carns it was a medical scare seven years ago that made her decide to start riding once again after retiring from a career in television.

Late last month she and several of her fellow Carefree Farms riders were up in Flagstaff for a competition where Carns finished second to Desert Hills resident Christie Murphy, another Carefree Farms rider.

While dressage is often called ballet on horse back the other two events that make up competitions are an adrenaline rush according to Carns. While dressage is an event judged on the precision movements of horse and rider the other two events are based on the speed with which horse and rider can navigate obstacles without knocking any of them over.



“When you're doing the cross country portion of the competition you're covering 400 meters per minute,” Carns said. “When you come up to some of the bigger obstacles you want to be sick, but then the feeling you have when you sail over them, there's nothing like it. You feel like a little girl flying.”

Anthem resident Kristi McLarean compares it to another adrenaline rush.

“It's kind of like riding a motorcycle,” she said. “It's the feeling of the wind rushing through your hair under your helmet.”

Cairns said she knew she would be competitive about riding and even though she has suffered a pair of concussions, broken ribs and injured her shoulder in various falls she doesn't see herself stepping away from the sport anytime soon.

“It's like anything else,” she said. “You have to have a passion for it to be any good.”

Murphy, who learned to ride as a kid, picked it back up at the age of 27. She said she got somewhat serious about being competitive seven or eight years ago.

“I'm out here five days a week riding,” she said. “You have to be committed if you want to be competitive.”

And while some have a competitive fire others view their time at Carefree Farms simply as good exercise and a way to relax and enjoy the camaraderie shared amongst their fellow riders.



Michelle Ochenkoski didn't start riding until she was 42 years old, prompted only when her up until then healthy husband had to have a heart procedure.

“I grew up with my Barbies on horses,” she said. “I always wanted to have a horse and finally realized I shouldn't wait any longer.”

The Anthem resident started with lessons, then upped her level of seriousness when she leased a horse before eventually buying her own.

“I don't play tennis or golf,” she said. “This is my thing. And I think I have more fun with this.”

Ochenkoski focuses her time on dressage.

“I like it because it's not as jostling as the other events. I don't do this to compete. I don't have any desire to compete, but I like working with my horse, getting some exercise and being out here with these people.”

One of the younger riders among the bunch is 16-year-old North Phoenix resident Elaina Corbin.

Corbin, who comes out to the ranch with her mother, Heidi, has been riding for nine years.

She said her experience working with horses has taught her a variety of things including responsibility, dedication, self-esteem.

Heidi said she enjoys watching her daughter have fun, but admits from her perspective it can be a bit nerve-racking.

Regardless of whether the riders are young or old they all say they've learned plenty from Alice Sano, who owns the property.

“You have to speak horse,” Sano said in explaining what it takes to be a trainer. “I help them to enjoy their horses. All horses and owners are a little different. My job is to enhance the relationship.”

Sano said as long as the mind is willing and the body is able she'll work with anybody, saying she has helped riders ranging in age from 6 to 100.

“I encourage them to set attainable goals,” she said. “Sometimes they get frustrated with themselves and that's

when I remind them to chill out. I can help them along, but sometimes it takes baby steps.”
For information about Carefree Farms, which is located at **36412 N. 7th Avenue, Phoenix**, go to carefreefarms.net or call **602-320-6613**.

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