

The Thrill of the Drill

Local Group Does Dressage Its Own Way by Dan Benz

Editor's note: For dressage riders in search of non-competitive outlets, joining a drill team can be a challenging and rewarding alternative. Opportunities to participate in drills are sometimes available through local 4-H clubs, farms, and riding schools. There is also the Saddle Gals and Guys, a local team that takes a distinctive approach to the pastime.

What started with an exhibition at the 1995 Damascus Community Fair has evolved into something much more: the Saddle Gals and Guys Equestrian Drill Team.

Now in its 12th year of performing at local parades, fairs and events, the team recruits its members from the four-county region around Damascus and Mt. Airy. Its approach to drilling makes it somewhat unique in this area. Whereas most drill teams strive for uniformity among riders and horses, the Saddle Gals and Guys team allows for a degree of individuality. As drill master (coach) Dave Mathes explains, "We are basically a recreational and demonstration drill team of both English and Western riders, with different breeds of horses [and] with a large variation in riders' ages and riding skills."

Cavalry Origins

Drill team riding involves choreographed movements performed at the trot and canter to music. Like the dressage upon which it is based, its origins are centuries old and its movements derived from those used by mounted cavalry in battle. Yet drilling is not as common in the eastern United States as it is out West. There, it's sometimes called "flag riding" and is often performed at rodeos.

The most famous drill teams are the Royal Lipizzaners and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Musical Ride, both of which have performed in the Washington, D.C. area.

At first, the Saddle Gals and Guys consisted only of ladies. Later, as its name indicates, the team went "co-ed." Today, it accepts both junior and senior riders with young horses, old horses, and horses of different breeds, regardless of discipline. Typically, the team meets two to three times per month to practice. It's a family affair with spouses, children and friends doing behind-the-scenes work to support the team at its various performances.

There are even two mother-daughter pairs and two sisters riding this year. "In addition to the training of horse and rider, some members go as far as sewing their own costumes and choreographing their own drills," says founding member, senior rider and team president Patti Mathes.

When asked why she enjoys the activity, she responds: "For the thrill of the drill! We really feel great when we hit our maneuvers just right during a performance."

A Variety of Routines

The Saddle Gals and Guys team performs a variety of routines. Two are performed by the entire lineup, with others performed by the team's subsets (the Western Quad, the English Quad, the Calgary, and, last season, the "Phantom of the Opera" Dressage Team).

Those drills performed by the entire team (normally eight to 16 members) include such complicated maneuvers as "the swinging gate," "wagon wheel," "ripping the zipper," "four-way box," "the ladder" and "the sweep." All require precision timing so horses don't interfere with each other.

"Ripping the zipper," for example, involves one parallel line of riders. Every other rider is facing in the opposite direction. Two end riders move forward in a circular motion and pair up. The pair then rides through and separates the line. All pairs repeat and follow. Spacing between lined riders and pairs may vary. The top two peel out and come to the end of the line as pairs, breaking up the line. The result resembles a zipper in motion.

Many of the team's routines are inspired by the Washington Ladies'

Riding Club Association Handbook, the bible of competitive drill teams out West. But for some of the specialty routines, the team members develop their own drills.

Teams Within Teams

The team's Western Quad consists of four Western riders carrying U.S. flags to patriotic music. The four riders of the English Quad have their own special style, too. "This past year, the English Quad performed to Frank Sinatra's 'New York, New York,' including riding in top hats and tails," says veteran rider Colleen Hood, another founding member. The Calgary is another Western foursome; it performs the fastest routines of all. Last year, the "Phantom of the Opera" Dressage Team offered an equine interpretation of the popular Andrew Lloyd Webber stage musical.

In addition to performing at various equine events, the Saddle Gals and Guys team participates in parades. The most notable of these have been the Cherry Blossom and St. Patrick's Day Parades in Washington, D.C. and the Charles Town Race Track Christmas Parade in Charles Town, West Virginia. Closer to home, the team performs in parades in Mt. Airy and Damascus.

"Parades are a great way for us to show ourselves off to a lot of people, without the stress of performing," says Sharon Benz, another veteran rider. "We've won several awards for participating in parades. Generally, the crowds are excited to see horses, so we always get lot of applause."

The Saddle Gals and Guys team also performed at the opening ceremonies for the 2006 Horse World Expo in Timonium. There, the members drilled to the strains of the National Anthem, complete with flags and a full display of team horsemanship.



Dan Benz

The "Phantom of the Opera" Dressage Team is the newest subset of the Saddle Gals and Guys. From left: Sandy Boyd, Rob Garrett, Patti Mathes and Kristen McDaniel.

The Drillers

At press time, the Saddle Gals and Guys lineup consisted of the following members: Sharon Benz (Woodbine), Rob Garrett (Damascus), Karen Good (Frederick), Nancy Good (Frederick) Lee Hajek (Woodbine), Colleen Hood (Gaithersburg), Patti Mathes (Damascus), Kim McDaniel (Boys), Kristen McDaniel (Boys), Michele McGuinness (Germantown), Virginia "Dee Dee" Myers (Monrovia), Laura Pettit (Glenwood), Lauren Tomai (Adamstown), Marcia Tomai (Adamstown), Cheryl Warren (Spring Grove, Pennsylvania) and John Wood (Laytonsville). As previously mentioned, the drill master was Damascus resident Dave Mathes.

A routine can reportedly be learned in a few practices. However, drillers say it can take about a year to feel completely "in synch," capable of reacting to unexpected challenges (i.e., a horse bucking, etc.) and comfortable riding in front of an audience.

For more information on drill teams, visit www.eququery.com. ■