

Chester Co. 4-H equestrians aspire to inaugural parade

BY SUZANNE KEENE

COCHRANVILLE — Members of the Gum Tree Equestrians, a 4-H drill team from Chester County, were happy to see President Reagan come out on top during the recent presidential election. While many voters were pleased to see Reagan win because of his economic policies and his strong military stance, the Gum Tree Equestrians were glad to see him win because he is a horse lover.

"He is a big horseman," drill team leader Linda Weigel asserts, noting that Reagan had many horses in his first inaugural parade.

The Gum Tree Equestrians hope to strut their stuff in his next inaugural parade early next year. "We hopefully can get there," Weigel says.

The drill team has made initial contact with Congressman Bob Walker and State Representative Art Hershey, who are helping the 4-H'ers gain a place in the parade. The team is in the process of applying to the armed forces for that privilege.

In the meantime, the group of 13 girls and one boy who make up the team is hard at work, practicing, practicing, and practicing some

more to perfect their routines.

Team members range in age from 10 to 17 and are all members of the Gum Tree 4-H Horse and Pony Club. Participation in the drill team is an option open to all club members.

Some of the drill team members have been riding for years, while others have only three or four months experience. Seven or eight of the members have been with the team since it began about a year ago and share their experience with the newer members.

The drill team is the brain child of Bill and Dawn McCuen, who own the Kalulvi Alihelisde Equestrian Center near Cochranville, where the team practices. Dawn gives riding lessons to all the team members and provides horses for some of the members who do not own a horse.

Team members who use Dawn's animals do 75 percent of the work for those horses and help out with the barn chores as part of their 4-H project.

The group gathers at the McCuen's every Saturday to work on their drills, practicing pairs, and crossovers, and learning to space the horses properly. Weigel said it took the team about one month of



Drill team leaders Charlotte Nicotera, Linda Weigel and Ann Drumheller proudly display a poster bearing pictures and newspaper clippings of the team.

practice just to learn to space the horses one horse length apart.

Getting the horses accustomed to the colorful, waving flags that team members carry in the drills is another challenge. "It takes quite a while to get a horse to the point where you can walk up to it with a flag," Weigel said.

Pairing up and matching strides also takes a lot of time. Every team member knows how to be the leader of the group and the positions switch all the time. "There will never be just one leader," Weigel asserts. "We want anyone to be able to take the lead."

While it does take a lot of time to learn all the elements necessary for a successful drill team, Weigel says "the kids pick it up remarkably fast."

During practice, the 4-H'ers often know when something isn't going right before the leaders, watching from the ground, do. "They seem to pick it up faster on the horses than we do on the ground," Weigel said.

The team performs their routine to a number of musical selections, but the team favorites are "Chariots of Fire" and "Carousel."

Ann Drumheller, another of the drill team leaders, does most of the choreography for the team's routines. Drumheller says she gets some of her ideas from books, but most of them just come out of her head. And, "sometimes the kids come up with the ideas themselves," she says.

The team is continually changing their routine. "We keep incorporating more things into it," making it a little more difficult each time by adding more involved movements, Drumheller said. "They really have come a long way."

Apparently all the hours of hard work and practice have paid off. The team has taken first place in the 75th Annual Wissahickon Day Parade in Philadelphia and first place in this year's Solanco Fair Parade. They were also the first place team at County 4-H Roundup and the second place team at Regional Roundup.

While at first the team had to solicit invitations to perform, and still do sometimes, they do receive unexpected invitations. Now at parades, Weigel said, "we hear people saying that they have heard of us."

The actual performances are the highlight of participating in the drill team for its members. "It's really fun when everyone smiles at you and waves," says team member Jennifer Esposito.



4-H equestrian Beth Brofee takes time out from a busy practice session to pose with her horse "Miraska." Although Miraska belongs to Bill and Dawn McCuen, who operate the equestrian center where the team practices, Beth does 75 percent of the work involved in Miraska's care as part of her 4-H project.

Jennifer, 13, is one of the original team members.

For fifteen-year-old Beth Brofee, another team member, "The most enjoyable aspect is working together." But she does add that

she especially enjoys hearing compliments along the parade route.

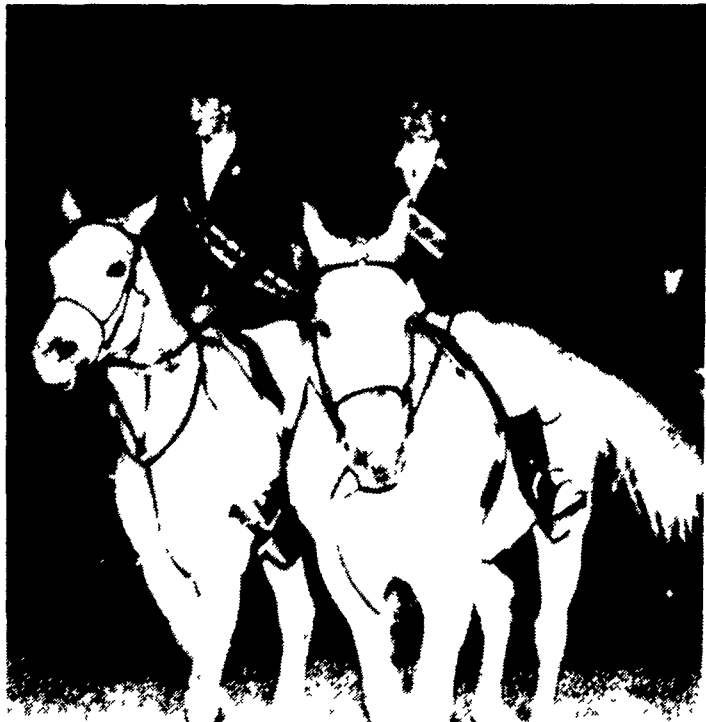
Beth also sees participation in the drill team as good training for

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Homestead Notes



All decked out in their riding finery, the Gum Tree Equestrians anxiously await an invitation to the inaugural parade. Pictured are: (front from left) Scott Delore, Michelle Bonhage, Amy Harbst, and Jenny Delore. In the center row from the left are Debbie Campbell, Tracey Weigel, Susan McAdam, Tina Phipps, and Sandy Bonhage. In rear from left are Chris Nicotera, Donna McLaughlin, Jennifer Esposito and Beth Brofee.



Members of the Gum Tree Equestrians work through a drill during a recent practice session.