



Tony Tye/Post-Gazette

Shannon Coyle, center right, 9, exclaims as she and Lauren White, 8, second from left, and Cassie Nadzam, 8, scrub Sugar at pony camp at Horses Unlimited. Holding the pony at far left is Amanda Smyth, 13.

Pony Camp lets children make equine friends

PONY CAMP FROM PAGE S-1

Treats of all sizes

Dudley somewhat grudgingly but gently allowed several children to ride him. And then he was replaced with Tank, a full-sized quarter horse who looked enormous by comparison.

Tank had his fans, too, and they were undaunted by his height and girth. The chestnut gelding cheerfully broke into a trot for riders like Mike Columbus, 9, of Brentwood.

"I'm the biggest rider and the heaviest," he said.

Brooke Ball, 5, of Bethel Park, the smallest and youngest rider, volunteered to ride the smallest pony or the biggest horse, and she did it with a big smile on her face.

"She first sat on a pony when she was 18 months old and she loved it even then," said her mother, Lori Ball, who watched from the sidelines with Brooke's baby sister, Sidney. "Until this camp, she had ridden only on short rides at the pony ring. She's really enjoying the camp" and wants to continue with riding lessons.

Safety is always a concern around horses, and the young campers all wore helmets and boots. Only two of the girls had real riding helmets, though. The others wore bicycle helmets, many of them in shades of pink or purple.

Horses Unlimited has been offering pony rides in the park since 1997. It got started about two years earlier.

The couple met while riding horses in South Park. When they married eight years ago, their horses posed with them

for the wedding pictures.

David Amoroso became a professional horseman after wrist and back ailments edged him out of his day job as a maintenance man. He started by offering his trailer for hire to people who needed to transport horses.

Mary Amoroso, 42, a legal secretary, gives riding lessons on weekends and evenings. She used a week of vacation from her day job to run the Pony Camp with her husband.

"Pretty much, we work seven days a week around the clock," David Amoroso said. The around-the-clock part comes into play when horses get sick and someone has to sit up all night with them.

Some horses and ponies had been victims of abuse or neglect when they arrived at the barn but were nursed back to health and coaxed into being gentle mounts for children.

All of the horses and ponies show evidence of good care. Tank, for instance, is well over 20 years old but looks at least 10 years younger. He is almost plump, without the jutting hipbones often seen in older horses.

Well taken care of

Phillip Heidenreich of Whitehall visited the camp on Tuesday, showing the children how horses and ponies have to have their feet trimmed regularly to prevent hoof cracks and other foot injuries. He's a farrier, the proper term for a person who trims hooves and shoes horses.

He's also an equine dentist. Horses and ponies must have their teeth "float-ed," meaning filed and trimmed. If their

teeth get too sharp or pointy, they cannot properly grind and digest their grain and hay.

Heidenreich also trimmed the hooves of Sweet Pea, the llama, who arrived at the barn when her former owners got tired of caring for her.

"You can't ride her, but she goes to parties and sometimes to the pony ring," David Amoroso said. "She's friendly and gentle. She never spits at children, though sometimes she'll spit at the horses" in the turnout pasture if they try to boss her around.

Toward the end of each camp day, the children exchanged their boots, helmets and long pants for cooler shorts and sandals. Then they did craft projects.

Their best project of the week was decorating real horseshoes with glitter and other craft supplies.

"Hung above the door of your house they bring good luck," Mary Amoroso told them. "Put the open end up" forming a "U" so that "your luck does not fall out."

The other children who attended the camp were Emily Columbus, 7, of Brentwood; Cassie Nadzam, 8, of Baldwin; Lauren White, 8, of Peters; Katy Minch, 7, and Shannon Coyle, 9, both of Bethel Park; Emily Allan, 8, of Bridgeville; and Gabrielle Levy, 5, of South Park.

For further information call Horses Unlimited at 412-835-7726.

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