



Photo by Ruxana Bhatti

Daymar Rosser rides Teeny Jeannie to his first win as a jockey in the Dilwyne Pony Races. Rosser is part of Work to Ride, which trains inner-city youth in horseback riding.

11-year-old inner-city youth a winner at Point to Point

By Andrea Miller
Staff Reporter

Sunday morning, 11-year-old Daymar Rosser's heart was pounding in anticipation of his first race. But by 12:05 p.m., he was grinning like a pro as he glanced back at the other riders behind him on the last stretch of race track, and then calmly accepted the trophy for a first place ride in the Dilwyne Pony Races at Winterturthurs Point to Point.

Lezlie Hiner was not nearly so subdued.

"I was jumping up and down and screaming. I must have looked like a crazy woman," she says. But she doesn't care. She's been training youth from the

rough neighborhoods of western Philadelphia in equine sports for years. They always show well at the races, but Daymar was the first one to win.

Twelve years ago, Hiner founded Work to Ride, a non-profit community-based organization, conceived of as an intervention program that uses horse sports to engage urban and at risk youth in challenging, positive ways as an alternative to destructive "street" activities. The program accepts referrals from schools and social service agencies that identify "at risk" children with academic problems, conduct disorder or involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Hiner's commitment is clear: every afternoon, she picks up the children from school and brings them to the stables for an hour tutoring and homework, then a few hours of riding and stable work. To date, more than 400 boys and girls from 7 to 18 have participated.

Others horse enthusiasts' commitment is clear, too: some have donated or loaned horses for the program, others have helped them join polo clubs or ride in fox hunts on their land. Many have donated cash or time.

Roy Feldman of Night Sight Farm helped get some of the children started in polo, fox hunting and racing. He says it's not charity that drives him, it's in everyone's best interest to bring good athletes into horse sports, because the future of the sport and land preservation in Bucks county depends on it.

Getting inner city children involved in the sport is also good for them, Feldman says.

"They begin to understand something about themselves, the animals and life in general by competing. They learn self reliance, independence, responsibility, and most of all, the appeal

to the senses," he says.

The exposure to a whole new social class and way of life through equestrian sports can be strange at first, Hiner says, but the children soon get used to it, and come to see it as an out to the sometimes dangerous street life of home.

Two days before the races, someone was murdered outside Daymar's home. When he is at the stables, the cadence and order of life with the horses takes him away from all that, she says. The schools are supportive of the programs, and their friends see them something like heroes, though most don't really have a clue about what kind of world they are playing in as horsemen, she says.

The support and commitment by the people who make Work to Ride possible is matched by the children themselves.

"I haven't seen this quality racing in ponies in years," says Feldman, whose own children ran what he jokingly calls "the world's slowest ponies" in the Dilwyne Pony Races years ago.

Hiner says that watching the spectacular win at the Kentucky Derby's a few days earlier by local racehorse Barbaro definitely had something to do with Daymar's state of mind and helped him win Sunday's race.

"Let me tell you, when he was done watching the Derby, he was so pumped. He was ready to go all out and look like a real jockey," she says. "Two years ago he wanted to race but didn't have the confidence, he was 9 and small back then. This year he had a pony, Teeny Jeannie, that can run fast. Also, this was the first year he felt confident enough to take her full out."

Daymar also rides on the Junior Varsity polo team started at Work to Ride through the cooperative efforts of Cowtown Polo Club, The Polo Training Foundation and the US Polo Association.

Shortly after the inception of Work to Ride, directors found the children were interested in playing polo—they were attracted to the speed and athletic ability of horse and rider, and the competitive atmosphere. The players made history as the first all African American Team to compete in Interscholastic Polo in 1999. They won their first Regional Interscholastic game a year later, the first round bracket at the Regional Interscholastic Polo Tournament in 2003, and the Eastern Regional Interscholastic Tournament in 2005.

The entire team was voted to the All Star team and Jabarr Rosser was voted the number 1 All Star player at the National Interscholastic Tournament in 2005 — the first African American to win the title.

Daymar's 13-year-old-brother, Kareem, also plays polo and races with Work to Ride. He was supposed to ride on Sunday, but his horse, "Work to Ride," developed a problem and had to be pulled from the race at the last minute.

Instead, Kareem walked his younger brother and Teeny Jeannie to the starting line.

"I was excited and nervous for him," Kareem says. "But he did well, no surprise."

Work to Ride is funded in part by riding lessons, horse boarding and Summer camp. However, it also relies on donations from those who give horses, time and money to support the program. For more information about Work to Ride, visit WorktoRide.org.

Volunteering in the community
SERVING UPPER MILL CREEK HUNDRED
& THE PIKE CREEK VALLEY

COMMUNITY NEWS

HOCKESSIN