

Riding High

16 inner-city youths are learning equine sports through Work to Ride and the nation is taking note.

By Lorraine Gennaro

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A veteran of Work to Ride, Kareem Rosser, 14, right, has mastered the sport of polo and now plays for his school, Valley Forge Military Academy.

One by one last Thursday, four horses were led from their stables and taken to an area for tacking up, the process of harnessing, saddling and readying the animal for riding.

All tacked up and someplace to go, Kareem Rosser from Tasker and Taney streets, Martikah Johnson from the 2000 block of Fernon Street, and two others from Southwest donned riding hats, grabbed mallets and mounted the animals. Still sore from a nasty fall the day before, 17-year-old Johnson was confidently back in the saddle. Leading the trot to the grassy field across the street was Rosser, wearing a traditional polo helmet and sitting tall atop his thoroughbred — the grace and grandeur of the 14-year-old an awe-inspiring sight.

"It feels like you're in control of something," Kareem, who plays on the Valley Forge Military Academy polo team and starts his freshman year at the school next month, said of riding. "It's a good feeling and it's fun."

The ancient sport of kings and the elite, as it has been dubbed, has transcended race and socio-economic barriers — at least in Philadelphia — thanks to Leslie Hiner and her Work to Ride program.

Based out of Chamounix Equestrian Center in Fairmount Park, not far from City Line Avenue and West River Drive, Hiner started Work to Ride in 1994 to give low-income kids constructive activities to do involving equine sports.

As the name implies, 7- to 19-year-olds learn horseback riding and polo free of charge in

exchange for feeding and grooming the animals. Work to Ride provides the riding and polo equipment.

"The goal is to keep them engaged 24/7, keep them off the streets and out of trouble, make sure they stay in school and succeed to the best of their ability academically," Hiner said. "Horses, horse sports and the barn are the vehicle by which they learn life's lessons. Program activities, commitment to themselves and the program is a huge asset to their social and cultural education."

A total of 34 horses are stabled at Chamounix, most of which are privately owned. About eight of the animals are used for polo.

Since its inception, the program has gained national notoriety, largely in part to its uniqueness. July 4, the 49-year-old Mount Airy equestrian and her proteges were featured on "Today" and previous press has included coverage by Sports Illustrated and HBO's "Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel."

In '99, the program made history when the Work to Ride polo team became the first African-American squad in the nation; six years later it won the Eastern Regional Interscholastic Polo tournament. In June, executive director Hiner, an accomplished equestrian and polo player, received the 2007 Philadelphia Sports Community Service Award, presented by the Philadelphia Sports Congress to the individual, business or organization that has done the most to contribute to the quality of life in the city through sports.

"It's kind of like any coach," Hiner, who graduated from University of South Carolina with a degree in psychology, said of her passion. "You want to see them excel and do good. Sportsmanship is tantamount to anything else."

Currently 16 kids are in the 20-capacity program, half of which are from South and Southwest Philly. Kareem's brothers Daymar, 12, and Jabarr, 16, also work to ride. All three started at about age 7 after Daymar happened upon the center as his bike route took him past the facility when the family resided in West Philly. A fourth sibling, Kareem's 14-year-old twin sister Kareema, also was in the program, with eldest brother David, 21, the sole family member who hasn't participated.

Most kids start early and remain until high school graduation. "We're not talking turnover, we're talking long-term," Hiner said of her program, which simply requires participants come from a low-income background and continue their schooling. Unlike many youth initiatives, there is no minimum grade point average for eligibility, just dedication and a verbal commitment from participant and guardian. "It's extremely beneficial and necessary that they are passionate about horses and what we have to offer," Hiner said. A mix of word-of-mouth, referrals and the director giving presentations at schools accounts for membership.

At 17, Johnson is one of the oldest. Joining in May, the soon-to-be senior and drummer in the Northeast High School band has always loved horses and found Work to Ride on the Web while searching for places that give lessons. "It's been fun. You don't just work, but you get to ride and it's taught me a new skill," she said of the riding, polo and caring for horses.

Members must commit to a minimum of eight hours a week, many putting in triple that amount or more, Hiner said. The nine-member Work to Ride Interscholastic Polo Team practices from 4:30 to 6 p.m. Monday to Saturday. In the winter, the team practices in the enclosed arena at Valley Forge Military Academy. "Valley Forge Military Academy is very supportive of us," Hiner said.

The Work to Ride team competes against the military academy squad and others throughout the country. Often people familiar with the program sponsor the kids to cover costs or funds are provided through the Work to Ride budget, which comes through donations and fund-raising. Two years ago, Kareem took part in a junior tournament in El Dorado, Calif., and that same year attended a polo camp in Dallas. "We get to go all over and meet different people. It's really exciting," he said.

Opening up an inner-city youth's world is a large part of what the Work to Ride program has to offer, along with boosting self-confidence and fostering pride. "I believe Winston Churchill said, 'Polo is a passport to the world,'" Hiner said.

Kids like Kareem are proof of the program's virtues: "The program has done a lot for me. It got me into a good school and it kept me off the street. It has me doing good things."

While on the polo team and practicing at the academy, Kareem was noticed and recruited to play for the prestigious military school's squad through an urban scholars program scholarship. "He doesn't play for us anymore," Hiner said with a laugh, pointing out the irony "one of my best players" was snatched up by a competitor.

When he's not riding high, the teen is flying high. Under the mentoring and instruction of American Airlines pilot Victor Castro, Kareem is learning to fly Cessnas at Northeast Airport, putting him closer to his dream of becoming a pilot for FedEx or UPS. With 10 hours of flight time under his belt, the teen has two years to go before he can get his pilot's license.

For many, staying on the ground with their steeds is challenge enough while learning to ride can be difficult without adding polo to the equation. "Seventy-five percent of the battle is being able to get to the ball on the horse. The rest of it is being able to hit the ball with skill," the director said.

Most have never played a sport and even fewer have mounted a horse, so fear is a common obstacle for new participants. "When you first start, it's scary because everything is new. Once you fall off once, that's scary. It takes you awhile to get over it, but you eventually move on," Kareem said.

Johnson knows all about falling, having done so a number of times. But, like they say, it doesn't matter how many times you fall, it's how many times you get back up. Describing her latest tumble, Johnson said, "When I fell it hurt so bad, but then I got back up."

And the horse? "He ran back to the barn!" she said.

Work to Ride's annual fundraiser is Sept. 16 at Lancaster Polo Club. Children from across the region will compete. Tickets are \$5 per person with VIP tents available for \$45. To find out more about the program, call 215-877-4419 or www.worktoride.net.