

## Chance of a lifetime



Work to Ride polo players and their mentors/chaperones, from left, Uche Ojeh, Tasha Harris, Kevin Jones, Brandon Rease, Kareem Rosser and Richard Prather pose for a photo after the team came in second place in a UNICEF tournament in Nigeria at the end of May. (Photo courtesy of Work to Ride)

NEWS – JUL 24, 2008

## Chance of a lifetime

by Lorraine Gennaro

**Two local teens were part of a polo team that traveled to Nigeria to compete in a UNICEF tournament.**

At most polo clubs, it's up to the players to tack their horses — the process of harnessing, saddling and readying the animal for riding — before a match. So when Kareem Rosser, Tasha Harris, Kevin Jones and Brandon Rease arrived at Fifth Chukker Polo Club and Resort in Kaduna, Nigeria, it felt like they were given the star treatment.

“That was a good treat. It was nice to just sit down and do nothing but play,” Rosser, from Tasker and Taney streets, said. “We never had that, we do everything ourselves.”

Harris, a graduate of World Communications Charter School at Broad and South streets, added, “Hospitality is really important to [Fifth Chukker]. They did everything. We offered to help, but they didn't want us to do anything.”

The four Work to Ride polo players got the chance of a lifetime last month when they went to the African nation to compete in a UNICEF tournament. Work to Ride came in runner-up after beating the Americas Team, which had players from America, Argentina and Brazil, 5-1, but losing to the South African team, 6-3.5, in the single-elimination tournament. Work to Ride was one of four teams in the tournament, which also included a squad from Nigeria.

“I think it was great,” Work to Ride founder Lezlie Hiner said of how her team fared. “I think they played pretty good and they represented Philadelphia and the United States very well.”

Rosser, 15, remembers one shot in particular that helped a fellow teammate score when their squad was down by a couple of goals against South Africa. He backed the ball to Rease, who drove it into the goal zone.

“That was a shot that I really remember and I’m proud of,” Rosser, who wants to be a commercial pilot, said.

Founded in 1994 by Hiner, an equestrian/polo player from South Carolina, and based out of Chamounix Equestrian Center in Fairmount Park, Work to Ride gives low-income kids constructive activities involving equine sports. As the name implies, 7- to 19-year-olds learn riding and polo free of charge in exchange for feeding and grooming the animals.

Under Hiner’s instruction, Work to Ride has gained national notoriety — in part because in ’99 its polo team became the first African-American squad in the nation; six years later, it won the Eastern Regional Interscholastic Polo Tournament. The program has been featured in an array of media, including Sports Illustrated and TV shows “Today” and “Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel.”

Rosser, who will be a sophomore at Valley Forge Military Academy in the fall, has been with the program since age 7, following in the footsteps and riding alongside brothers Daymar, 13, and Jabarr, 17, and twin sister Kareema.

Harris, who plans to major in biology at Temple University in the fall on academic scholarship, has been riding since 2003 and is captain of the girls’ team.

**The Nigerian experience** came the team’s way through Terri Brennan, a New York supporter of Work to Ride who has donated equipment among other things. Brennan contacted Hiner and told her about the tournament since she plays at Fifth Chukker, as her marketing and public relations job frequently takes her to Nigeria.

To Rosser, Fifth Chukker looked like clubs in the States.

“Well-kept grass, it was nice. From the pictures I saw [on the Web], I expected the place to be very good. I was excited to be there,” he said.

Doing homework when he got Hiner’s e-mail telling him about the trip, Rosser remembers, “I was excited. I thought about it all the time after that. I couldn’t wait to go over there and see everything, visit new places and meet new people.”

Work to Ride got to make the trek free of charge, according to Hiner. “This is the first time children have participated in that particular tournament, so this was a first,” the founder said, adding she believes this is why the polo resort paid their way.

The tournament was sponsored by Access Bank, which donated \$60,000 to UNICEF to combat AIDS in Africa. Rosser said the event gave him a chance to learn more about the 62-year-old organization that provides humanitarian and developmental assistance to children and mothers in developing countries.

“It felt good playing in a tournament and raising money,” he said.

A number of factors played into Hiner choosing the four teens, including experience and grades, she said.

Nigeria held two firsts for Harris and Rosser: being out of the country and playing polo outside America, though Work to Ride frequently plays throughout the States.

"I was like, 'Wow, Africa!' We do a lot of traveling, but I never ever thought we'd go out of the country for polo," Harris said.

It took two flights to get to Nigeria from Philadelphia, the first seven hours to London, where the group had a day layover and saw the sights, including Big Ben and the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. Rosser was especially taken by the latter because of the horses and pomp. "It was cool. There were a lot of tourists there," he said.

For Harris, the fun started the minute she boarded the plane and in London she was awestruck: "It was kind of cool to see the people driving on the other side of the car."

When not riding high, the visitors did plenty of sightseeing during their 11-day stay, including visiting two schools and holding court with the Amir of Katsina.

"We took a trip to his palace and got to see his trophy room [for polo and other accomplishments]," Hiner said. "His grandfather saw the game of polo in England and brought it to Nigeria so there is a very important connection there."

Brennan arranged the visits to the schools, one public, the other private. "We wanted the trip to be educational, not just polo. We wanted them to experience the culture, not be insular," Hiner said.

The visitors were struck by what they saw in the public school. "They have three kids sharing one nub of a pencil. That's how poor this school is. There were three to four kids at a desk," Hiner said, adding first- and second-grade classrooms were 140 strong.

Work to Ride "adopted" the public school and sent a care package of pencils, erasers and crayons upon their return. "We're going to continue to do this to help them," the founder said.

Added Harris, 18, "To be there and actually see it in front of you was a real eye-opener. It made me appreciate the education I got back home. It's hard for them to worry about learning when they don't have any food to eat."

Hiner is hoping for a return trip next year to compete in the UNICEF tournament and, of course, check in on their adoptive school. "I thought it was very cool. Hopefully, they'll get invited back," she said of her team.