

# Philadelphia Youth Fight Poverty Through Polo

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In a few of the field parks within Philadelphia, if you listen closely, you can hear the thunder of hooves galloping over the grass in some of the toughest, inner-city neighborhoods.

No, it's not the city's mounted police in action--it's a small group of young Black horsemen participating in the Work To Ride program--playing polo. And they're not your typical polo players. Some wear their hair in cornrows while others are clad in an urban uniform of baggy pants and sports jerseys.

They were introduced to the sport by longtime horse trainer Lezlie Hiner, who moved her organization from her farm to a vacant horse stable at the 1,500-acre Chamounix Equestrian Center in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park.

Founded in 1992, Work To Ride is a non-profit, community-based program for at-risk youth that utilizes horses and horseback riding in unique and innovative ways as a means of engaging urban youth in wholesome constructive activities. Participating youth learn aspects of horse care, stable management, riding disciplines and develop horsemanship skills. It actively promotes junior and interscholastic polo as its primary horse sports program. To qualify, the children must be low-income city residents.

The program holds summer horse camps, gives tiding lessons and has an "urban riding program" to which only about a dozen youths per year are accepted.

And it's not all horseplay. Youths can play polo in the program as long as they maintain a C average in school, are consistent in their twice-weekly practices and keep the 35 horses, their stables and equipment in good shape.

Hiner says the young riders garnered their share of stares when they started appearing for matches at some upper-crust polo clubs. That changed after the older and more experienced competitors saw them in action.

"When you're an adult and a kid takes the ball away from you and goes down the field and scores, that's where the respect comes," Hiner states. "That's the equalizer."

Nationally, polo remains a game played by the wealthy. The typical player is a 40-year-old white-collar worker with an average income of \$174,000 a year, according to the United States Polo Association (USPA). There are about 275 USPA member clubs with more than 3,500 players.