

Why should kids have all the fun? The demands aren't
club for grownups, but the interest in good horsemanship

THE OLD PEOPLE



From left: Sherry Maratta in the dressage phase of the October 2000 OPPC event. At last summer's OPPC Fun Show, Rick Jacob's Downtown Girl needs to tuck those front legs a little better for this 2-foot-6 fence, and Karen Striley rides Domino in a hack class. Far right: Members wait to compete in dressage at the October event, held at Final Decision Farm in Woodbine, Maryland.



quite as rigorous in this growing
ship—and fun!—is just as strong.

OPLE'S PONY



CLUB



It was just an offhand remark, really, but Hope Jacob couldn't put it out of her mind. "We were at a hunter pace about three years ago," she says. "The De La Brooke Pony Club kids were giving a gymkhana demonstration, and somebody turned to me and said, 'Hope, you should start an adult pony club.' I went home and I really started thinking about it."

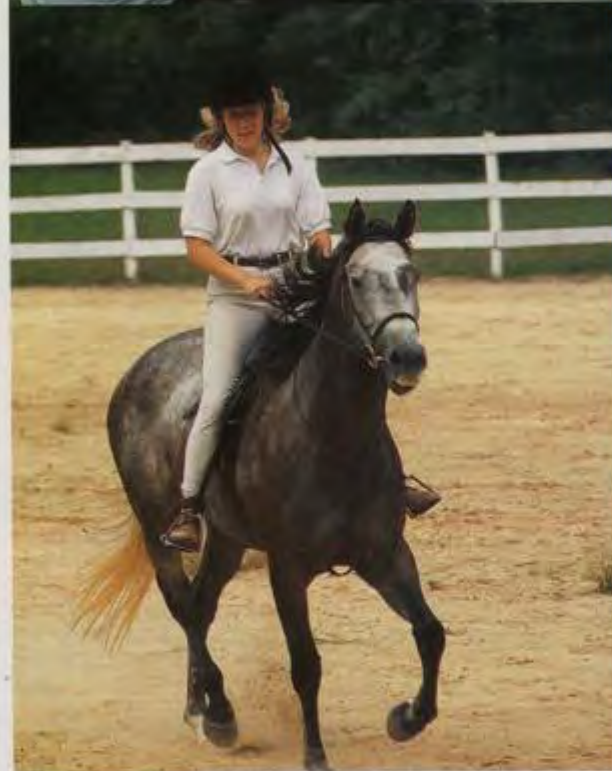
Hope, who lives in Lothian, Maryland, had plenty to think about. She had foxhunted for nearly thirty-five years; with De La Brooke Foxhounds, based in southern Maryland, for the past eighteen of those years, including eight years on staff. She'd shown successfully at the "little-time" level. And the students she'd taught, both youngsters and adults, did well at local Annapolis-area hunter shows.

But the times they were a-changin'. Getting up well before dawn, driving long distances to meets on frigid days, coming home past dusk—what once was fun had become somewhat wearing. After serious thought, she and her husband, Rick, decided that perhaps hunting would no longer be their first pleasure. "At fifty-three," she says, "I didn't want to give up riding and participating in horse sports. I guess I simply wanted to slow down."

Hope still wanted the camaraderie and community of group horse activities, but with an educational slant and in a more controlled riding environment. So she took that chance remark and ran with it. In the spring of 1998, she got together with three other riding friends of "a certain age" and started the Old People's Pony Club (OPPC) for adults twenty-one and older.

FAIR LEFT AND TOP RIGHT PHOTOS: COURTESY OF HOPE JACOB; TOP LEFT AND BOTTOM: OEBLER BY

Produced by Mandy Lorraine and Kip Goldreyer



Clockwise from left: Kim Stokes and Addie in a hack class at the Fun Show; lunch ("this is what we do the best—EAT," says Hope Jacob) at the OPPC Lothian Fall Show; Hope Jacob and Downtown Girl; Joyce Dougherty leads the way on the Gettysburg Battlefield overnight ride.



Filling a Need

"Quite simply, I thought there was a real need and desire for adults to get together and enjoy riding in a bunch of different ways, including very low-key competitions not dominated by professional bigwigs," Hope says. "We wanted an organization where everybody was basically in the same boat. We wanted to do horse trials, have horse shows, learn barrel-racing, go on trail rides,

have educational activities, enjoy covered-dish suppers, and do overnights. We wanted to educate ourselves, but not in such a way that anybody would go away discouraged—not even the 'evergreens' who maybe only ride twice a week. Even if their horses were just used for casual trail rides and were not terribly well schooled, these riders deserved their own organization that would make the sport of riding fun,

safe, validating, and affordable."

A riding group Hope didn't initially welcome was highly rated graduate Pony Clubbers. "An A asked to join; I had reservations about accepting her." After being put off for some time, the young woman asked Hope why the hesitation. "I told her, 'I don't want you coming here, being cocky, and putting us oldsters down.' And she said, 'But your club has activities I've never done with my horses

LOWER-LEFT PHOTO BY GÜLER UV; OTHERS COURTESY HOPE JACOB



and clinics I couldn't otherwise afford.' That was good enough for me. We had a barrel-racing clinic, and she did it. We had our overnight trail ride—something she'd never done before—and she was a fabulous addition to the group. When two B's wanted to join, I never hesitated to welcome them."

Testing, Testing

Organizing wasn't new to Hope. She'd organized hunt balls and hunter paces. Her husband, Rick, had showed at Hunt Nights indoors, and she'd coached the team. And when their two daughters were in Pony Club, Hope routinely volunteered. So she knew a good organization when she saw one—which is why she borrowed from Pony Club for the basic structure of the OPPC.

Most significantly, Hope adopted a version of the US Pony Clubs' rating system, modified slightly "because their standards are so high." New OPPC members are encouraged to buy the USPC D manual and study it; all members must be rated to participate in mounted activities. Most today are rated at the D-1 or D-2 level. Some have gone on to achieve C ratings. "These adults study and study and study about parts of the horse, feeding, tack, bandaging, and so on," says Hope. "And when they come for their rating rides, they are very, very serious."

In keeping with OPPC philosophy,

the ratings focus more on overall horsemanship than on jumping ability. Hope eliminated the requirement for an emergency dismount and threw out the time limit on cross-country to accommodate riders who are uncomfortable galloping. "And our fence heights are more moderate: Our A's and B's jump 2 feet 9 inches instead of 3 feet 9 to 4 feet; C's jump 2 feet 6 instead of 2-9 to 3-3; D's jump 18 inches to 2 feet instead of 2-6 to 2-9."

Furthermore, a D-1 basically only has to walk-trot and step over poles. A D-2 has to demonstrate the canter, trot low jumps, walk out cross-country, and trot up and down a hill. A D-3 has to canter six fences with a change of direction (not necessarily on the correct lead), canter cross-country, and negotiate a cross-country obstacle. Western and non-jumping English riders negotiate trail-class-type obstacles to obtain the higher ratings.

But, adds Hope, "there is tremendous validation for lower-level riders. There is no pressure over them. We never say, 'OK, now that you're a D-1, your next move is you *have* to become a D-2. They can stay at D-1 for the rest of their lives and never advance if they don't want to.'

Growing by Leaps and Bounds

Two years later, the Southern Maryland

OPPC boasts sixty members. The club hosts three activities a month in the spring, summer, and fall. "The rating rides can be huge, but we close entries for the clinics at fifteen participants. There's an unmounted meeting the second Tuesday of every month (attendance isn't required; we rely heavily on e-mail for communications) and a covered-dish supper on a Friday every third month." At meetings, members listen to guest speakers, watch videotapes, and hold "know-downs." They attend charity rides and clinics about braiding, barrel-racing, dressage, jump-judging, and polocrosse. They have seminars on cleaning tack. They've even had a night



Top left: "Hangin' out at the in-gate" at the Summer Fun Show. Above: Hope Jacob presents the championship ribbon and trophy for the July 2000 Event to Monkton (Maryland) OPPC chapter member Lisa Giacomo.

out at Rosecroft Raceway, where they got to ride in the start car.

But that's not all. Another five hundred members are partaking of similar OPPC activities in chapters based elsewhere in Maryland and in New Jersey, Virginia, West Virginia, Georgia, Louisiana, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Iowa, and California. OPPC volunteers publish a monthly newsletter and have developed

a Web site. In another five years, Hope thinks the organization may well grow to five thousand.

Will You Be One of Them?

To judge by the Southern Maryland chapter, the answer may well be yes if you're a hunter, Western, dressage, pleasure/trail, endurance, combined-training, or gymkhana rider. When you join, your age is most likely to be about forty-five—although you could be a wet-behind-the-ears twenty-four or a golden-years sixty-seven. If you're like three quarters of your fellow members, you'll have a full-time job. And if you're like approximately four out of five, you'll be a woman. You'll probably have ridden when you were young, and you may be a "pretty darned good rider who—because of injuries or age—is no longer overflowing with confidence," says Hope. If (unlike most of your fellow members) you don't come equipped with average horse knowledge, you'll "be more inclined to laugh and say, 'Well, gosh, I've been doing it wrong all this time' than to get disgruntled and storm off. In fact, everybody is willing, if

sions for Standardbreds in our classes—they do move a little bit differently from the hunters."

And why not Standardbreds? After all, OPPC has already experimented with redefining many under-saddle English activities to include Western riders. For example, at the Southern Maryland chapter's first horse trial last summer, the Western riders (and English riders who didn't enjoy jumping) did only two phases: dressage, which those who chose to did in Western saddles and were judged accordingly; and cross-country, where they negotiated "trail-type" obstacles set up next to the jumps.

A lot of work? "Sure it is," admits Hope. "But when somebody tells me at a clinic or a horse show, 'I am having the time of my life,' or 'This is a dream come true,' it makes all the work worthwhile."

Affordability . . .

. . . is as important to Hope as it is to the other members, and she drives a hard bargain when setting up clinics and out-of-town activities. "Before we went on an overnight ride to Gettys-

a still-reasonable \$35. And, hey! You don't own a horse? You're encouraged to join anyway, on a lease or share basis.

What about that American-as-apple-pie bugaboo, liability? "Our chapter has a \$1 million umbrella policy that covers property damage we may incur," says Hope. "As far as personal injury is concerned, each member must provide the club with proof of insurance and sign the usual release of liability at horse shows and other activities."

OPPC Goes Big-Time

Is OPPC here to stay? Hope thinks so. "A woman who had no idea who I was called from Virginia about a horse I'd advertised for sale. After I gave a brief description of the animal and assured her I was not a dealer, I asked her what specifically she wanted to do with the horse. Her response: 'I want a horse that would be suitable to ride and compete on in OPPC.' I was—well, shocked and stunned. After a brief pause, I asked her what chapter she belonged to, then told her that I was Hope Jacob. There was an even longer pause before she asked, 'The one who

OPPC's motto: . . . not for the ribbons nor the glory, but for the camaraderie and the memories . . .

not eager, to get educated. They may have little or no idea how to present themselves at a horse show—what's involved in walk-trot-canter, or what dressage is. But they'll soon be doing a little of it, and having fun."

The horses? "We have every breed you can imagine. Some have been owned for two, three, or four years and never had anything done with them. Now they've been brought out of the back yards and taken to clinics, shows, events, everything. A lot are Western horses, definitely, but we have a lot of nice dressage horses and Thoroughbreds, too. Somebody from Louisiana even e-mailed me recently to say that the people in her barn ride Standardbreds and would that be OK? So we might have to make some provi-

burg Battlefield, I told the facility owners, 'Everybody in our club is on a budget, and we need the best rate you can give us.' And they did just that. Each member paid \$20 for a four-hour guided session with an informative, wonderful instructor, and \$10 for a bedded stall or outside paddock. We brought our own food and hay. Bottom line, it was extremely affordable."

On the home front, annual membership is \$35. A rating ride is \$10. Clinics are kept at the bargain-basement rate of \$25 to \$35 an hour per participant. Horse shows require two fees: a yummy covered dish for the post-show picnic, plus \$15 for the day, whether you're riding in one class or ten. Because of all that's involved in a horse trial, Hope is reluctantly considering raising that entry fee to

started OPPC? When I hung up the phone, I told Rick, 'Well, honey, the club is big-time now. People are looking for OPPC horses.'"

OPPC's motto is: . . . *not for the ribbons nor the glory, but for the camaraderie and the memories . . .* As Hope says, "We have all met such wonderful new friends, enjoyed learning about each other's horses, watched our Western members do their first-ever dressage tests (some English members, too). This is a club where a member does as much as he/she wants, is always welcome—and please do bring a friend." ■

For more on the Old People's Pony Club, visit their Web site (www.OPPC.net), give Hope Jacob a call (410-867-7111), or drop her an e-mail (hopeoppc@yahoo.com).