

# "SO MUCH



Think Pony Club kids are the only ones whose gatherings blend contests and camaraderie? Come along to a rally for their grownup counterparts!

BY SHARA RUTBERG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MANDY LORRAINE

**"M**y goal today," says Candace Gerrety as she adjusts her boots, "is not to barf."  
"You're not gonna barf," responds her friend Kathryn Shipley. "Not *this* time."

On a drizzly May Saturday, Candace, Kathryn, and more than sixty other riders are gathered at Tranquillity Farm in Monkton, Maryland, for the First Annual Old People's Riding Club (OPRC) Rally. The event, like the club itself (see "OPRC Basics" on page 44), is a fun, non-competitive opportunity to celebrate horses and the people who love them.

### One Member's Way In

Like many OPRC-ers, Candace (a mother of three) rode and took lessons growing up.

When she finished college, the lessons ended—until her daughter, now ten, wanted to learn to ride. Candace found herself back in the stable, "the smell of the horses and the barn hit me," she recalls, "and it was like Pandora's box."

She signed on for lessons—and before long, she bought Billy, a Pinto-Percheron cross. "Then it was like 'what do I do now?' It was the first time I'd had a horse without someone standing there telling me what to do every minute. And I'd never been out of the ring."

Searching for people to ride with, Candace heard about and went to a meeting of the nearest OPRC. "I wanted to learn how to go more places with my horse. I mean, I'd never trailer to a place by myself, but I'd definitely go if I had someone to go with me, and that's





Rallying for the fun of it: Candace Gerrety with Billy (top left) and Mary Ellen Taygart and Baldwin (top right). Center: Founder Hope Jacob demonstrates OPRC attitude. Bottom: Retired physician Nancy Telfer—whose number is also her age.



the idea of the club: finding people to do fun things with." She joined.

Two years ago, Candace started a closer-to-home chapter in Poolesville, Maryland, with about ten people—and "it just snowballed. You know how everybody talks at the tack shop."

Poolesville now has forty-eight members—and "whatever anybody wants to talk about, I'll organize," Candace says. Her group's heard talks from an equine dentist and a masseuse and done a variety of mounted clinics. "We had a great 'bombproofing' clinic," she remembers. "Of course, every trail ride ends up as a bombproofing clinic!"

Last year, some Poolesville members got together to go to a horse trial at Iron Bridge (also in Maryland). Candace, who'd never shown before, "got so nervous that I barfed before my dressage test. Or maybe I barfed before stadium. Hey, Kathryn, when did I barf at Iron Bridge?"

"Before stadium," says Kathryn. "I turn around and there she is, bent over. I thought, 'Oh no, there goes her stock tie.'"

Like any friend worth her salt (or Pepto-Bismol®), Kathryn buoyed Candace with advice: "Get over it, girl! It's only 18 inches! Your horse has more of a chance of falling down before he gets to the in-gate!"

Candace made it through Iron Bridge. In fact, she placed first in her class in dressage and fourth in stadium.

It wasn't until the next event that she hit the ground, thanks to an unfortunate combination of mud and momentum on the cross-country course. "All of a sudden, I'm lying on the ground and Billy's lying on top of me."





Undeterred, she remounted and finished—and “I was so excited that I’d finished the course and didn’t barf or anything that I had to tell Kathryn.” She rode straight to where her friend, who takes showing a bit more seriously, was trotting warm-up circles. “Hey, Kathryn!” she yelled triumphantly, half her body and her horse’s covered with mud. “I fell!”



Test readers (and their steeds) are welcome in the arena.

## Rally Day: Casual Dressage

With that memory, and an eye on today’s mud, Candace is a bit nervous. But Billy, whose grand dappled presence and hunt-cap-sized hooves make most of the horses around him look like fragile toys, seems not the least concerned. As she ties on her number, he stretches his nose toward the grass. “To him,” she says, “the whole world’s a salad bar.”

As Candace and Billy wait quietly beside the dressage ring for their ride time, Poolesville member Susan Omran’s horse, Tildy, is not so quiet. This is their first outing; Tildy, a red-roan Brabant mare (a heavy draught horse), dances in place. So, forgetting her own nerves, Candace leads the pair away from the dressage arena to an emptier area where they can do some calming circles.

Returning, Candace learns that the test she’s studied is not the test on today’s program. Unperturbed, she has another member call the correct test for her and trots confidently down center line, Billy’s feathers dragging in the mud.

Susan, back now and scheduled to ride next, is still worried. “What am I going to do? I don’t even know where the letters are!”

Elsewhere, this would be a problem. Not here. In the OPRC, even dressage is casual. When Susan’s turn comes, Candace rides Billy back in and stands on the outside of the dressage-arena border, test form in hand. “OK, just trot all the way down to the end and make a left,” she yells. “Keep trotting

all the way to the middle of the other side. . . . Now make a circle in the middle. . . . Just follow the hoofprints!”

Susan finishes her test, trots out of the arena beaming, hangs a right toward Candace and Billy, and the ladies high-five. “That was my first test!” Susan yells—and the small group of riders waiting their turns cheers.

“I love these guys!” Susan says later about Candace and the other club members. (Having returned to riding after a serious injury, she’s found the OPRC support network particularly meaningful.) “When I don’t have confidence, they’re there. When I don’t know what to do, they’re there. And when I don’t want to do something, they’re still there!”

## Cross-Country, Fences Optional

Unfazed by the drizzle, Christian Phillip stands on the grass between the stadium arena and the cross-country course. A camera-bag strap slips down his shoulder; a water bottle pokes out of his raincoat pocket; a piece of yarn from a number is stuck in a squiggle to the Velcro<sup>®</sup> of his jacket. His jeans are soaked to the knees. His hands grip the reins of two horses pulling in opposite directions. Neither horse is his.

Christian and his wife, Leslie, are members of the Poolesville chapter. Today is her first show; he’s skipped riding to serve as her groom. Leslie is leasing one of Tranquillity Manor’s horses, made available by the club (\$25 for the day) so members who don’t own or can’t transport horses can par-

ticipate in the rally. The Phillips’ horse died last year; since then, they’ve ridden with a local stable, paying a monthly fee for unlimited riding. Leslie gets to the barn two to three times a week; Christian, four or five. “The club’s been a great way to get in contact with other people who ride,” he says.

Nearby, Leslie gazes downhill toward the cross-country course. She’s never ridden the horse she’ll compete on, but she says she’s not nervous. “I’m stressed out in the rest of my life—I’m a Type A personality in general—but here is one place where I can take it easy.”

Poolesville chapter member Jane Gates is not quite as relaxed. “How’re you doing?” Candace asks.

Jane shakes her head grimly. “Dressage did not go well.”

“Mom! You were fine!” insists her teenage daughter Katy, who’s usually the one in the saddle.

“I’m stressed,” Jane says quietly.

“The whole idea of this is *not* to get stressed,” says Candace. “Do you want a sandwich?”

“No,” says Jane.

“Do you want some water?”

“No.”

“Do you want a Valium?”

Pause.

“No.”

Hay bales, stone walls, and coops dot the rolling green cross-country



Team spirit boosts confidence over the barrels.



course. In Novice, the obstacles reach 2 feet 6 inches. For the entry-level Walk/Trot Division, the rails are lowered to 18 inches and scaled-down jumps are set next to the larger obstacles: water-bucket-size barrels, coops sized for Cornish hens, and gates that probably wouldn't keep horses in a paddock.

But size, as always, is in the eye of the beholder—and the beholder's rider. If club members don't feel comfortable jumping the smaller course, they don't have to; in OPRC cross-country, you don't have to leave the ground. In the Non-Jumping Cross-Country Division, riders complete a course through sets of flags and standards, getting a feel for riding out on uneven terrain without having to worry about jumping anything.

Another option: Riders who want to



OPRC members take a break from running the secretary's booth to display the rally's prize baskets.

jump but aren't thrilled with the idea of attacking the course on their own can jump with other horses and riders. Competitors in packs of four can be judged collectively as a team, or as individuals.

Candace's team is on course, a sort of trotting support group with a "Leave No Woman Behind" motto. At some fences, their *esprit de corps* becomes

"esprit de circle": As one horse and rider circle repeatedly before jumping, team members flank the fence as mounted runout protection. For most of the course, however, the four pop over the fences one behind the other, riders two through four heartened to see that the leader is not devoured by scary tires or suspicious-looking brush.

At the other end of the OPRC experience spectrum are members such as Aggie O'Brien. A member of the Brass Ring chapter in Unionville, Pennsylvania, she maintains amateur status as a timber racer and breeds and trains racehorses. The horse she brought to the rally is a former equitation champion with miles at Madison Square Garden. For Aggie, involvement with the OPRC is not so much a learning experience as for others, but she finds it just as meaningful. "It's fun to be a part of a group that really wants to learn, and where I am able to share some of the expertise that I have. I

## OPRC Basics

First profiled in this magazine in June 2001, what was then the "Old People's Pony Club" got its start in spring 1998. That was when founder Hope Jacob took up a friend on her suggestion that "Hope, you really should start an adult Pony Club." She did, adopting the US Pony Clubs' model as her basic structure, though with no pressure for riders who qualified for D-1 level (the minimum) to move up.

The idea caught on: By the time of our article, Hope's founding chapter had sixty members; some five hundred more members were in other chapters, mostly on the East Coast but a few farther west and south. And the day after that June issue hit her mailbox in Lothian,

Maryland, Hope says, she found 180 e-mails on her computer from people around the country interested in joining the fun. Two years later, what's now the Old People's Riding Club (Hope changed the name last year to avoid any confusion with the US Pony Clubs) is up to nearly a thousand members, with thirty-five chapters spread over twenty-two states.

To connect with the Old People's Riding Club, see their Web site: [www.oldpeoplesridingclub.org](http://www.oldpeoplesridingclub.org). For more about OPRC's history, membership, and activities, go to [www.EquiSearch.com](http://www.EquiSearch.com) and click on "Practical Horseman" under "In Our Magazines."

love to teach. My newest, biggest passion now is teaching."

Passion, of course, can shine through at any pace. One need not gallop hell-bent-for-timer over slippery footing and hairy banks to appreciate the glorious feeling of being out in the open on a horse. Downhill from Aggie, Candace's team has spread out a bit between fences. As Billy canters, his mane lifts and blows like the foam on

the crest of an ocean wave; his feathers and Candace's number flap in the wind; her smile is big enough to spot from across the meadow as she reaches the finish whooping and laughing. "We made it! That was so much fun!"

Cross-country is their favorite phase. "Stadium? Billy's just not made for those turns, and I'm not a dressage person. I really love cross-country."

Able to aim well above "not barf-

ing" these days, Candace remembers, "When I began with the club, my mother was dying of cancer; I'd moved nearby to care for her. It was a time when I really needed to do something for myself." She set modest riding goals, "and once I reach those, I set new ones."

Walking back to the trailer, adrenaline still spiking, she throws her arms around Billy's neck. "I love this horse!"

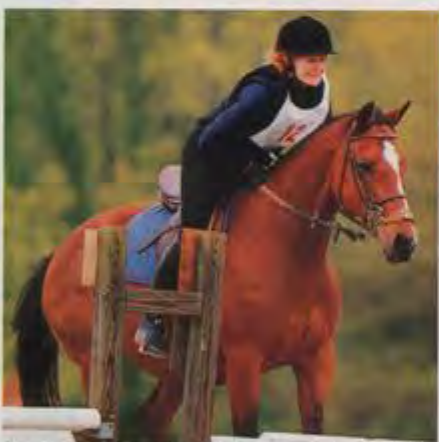


## Stadium and Support

A petite rider on a dark-bay mare splashes through the twists and turns of the stadium course, her heels-down leg position as consistent as the easy rhythm she maintains throughout her round. They finish and exit the arena, the rider smiling and patting her horse. The number on her back is 73. That is also her age.

"Two years ago I wasn't even sure I'd ride again," says Nancy Telfer, keen blue eyes peering out from under her helmet brim. As matter-of-factly as if listing fences in the course, she says, "I have an artificial shoulder, a plate in my thigh, an artificial knee, my back makes a 45-degree angle at L2, and I've lost three quarters of my rotator-cuff muscle." She smiles. "But I'm not complaining. I get to ride."

A champion Intermediate event rider at Pebble Beach in the 1960s, Nancy got involved with the Piedmont OPRC chapter while recovering from an injury.



Sometimes a closer look (like the one Leslie Phillip and leased-for-the-day mount Denise are taking) is all that's needed to boost confidence.

"I joined the club to have people to ride with," she says, "I needed something to help get my confidence back. This came at the right time for me." Now she rides seven days a week, weather permitting, and hunts regularly. "In my previous life," she says slyly, "I was a physician. I'm very useful to have along. I can provide first aid, and I know when to tell them to get an ambulance for myself."

Not all the stadium rounds go as smoothly as Nancy's. After two refusals, a woman on a bay horse turns to leave



Susan Omran and Tildy slosh across the diagonal.

the ring, looking discouraged. Another mounted club member exchanges a couple of words with the judge, then trots out to join the woman. The two pairs complete the entire course, one following the other over the fences. Both leave the arena smiling.

"That's what it's all about," says OPRC founder Hope Jacob, who's thoroughly enjoying the First Annual Rally. "When we have clinics, everybody's always cheery; there's never anything cutthroat. Everybody's very supportive—and if one of the members does become frightened, which happens, somebody will just go into the ring and help them."

The club's camaraderie bridges disciplinary boundaries, too. Earlier in today's rally, a handful of Western riders helped their English counterparts through an elaborate obstacle course, available to ride for itself or as an alternative to jumping the stadium course. Their assistance was particularly welcome to one rider: Facing the course, which included a "beach scene" with flapping umbrellas and big pink beach balls, traffic cones, and a jacket that had to be moved from one standard to another, she seemed absolutely baffled. "I'm supposed to do *what* with the letter and the mailbox?"

Though only a handful of riders at this Maryland rally are riding Western, the ratio flips elsewhere in the country; some chapters are completely Western. "Each chapter does what they want,"



Colors flying in the stadium ring, Dana Beisner and All By Myself clear a fence.

says Hope. "That's the fun of it. Some chapters have gaited horses; others are predominantly Arab." Other chapters mix and match: English riders try pole-bending and team penning, Western riders try dressage tests, and at least one chapter fields that Pony Club standby, a polocrosse team.

As the afternoon rolls on, the wind picks up, the temperature drops, and trailers begin rolling homeward. A group of soggy people wrapped in blankets, including Kathryn and Jane and Katy, gathers at the stadium in-gate around Candace and Billy, who'll do the last ride of the day. All afternoon, Candace has been providing emotional support for her friends. Now they line the rail as she splashes out into the mud and makes her circle.

Candace gathers Billy's reins, looks toward the first jump, and says determinedly, "OK, we can handle this." She centers Billy carefully for each fence. The poles seem like twigs as the big horse jumps (sometimes steps) over them, his hooves splattering gallons of water as he lands. Over the crossrails . . . over the vertical . . . and they finish the course muddy but clean.

As Candace trots toward the gate, beaming, her friends clap and holler. Billy's ears flick toward the sound. "Thank you!" she says, to her horse and to her friends.

As she dismounts, she again says, "That was so much fun!" Not to mention that she finished the day without losing her seat—or her breakfast. ■