

## Saddle up!

Kids learn to ride — and learn skills that will help them in life and in growing up — at summer horse camp

By Melanie Sims, Herald-Times Staff Writer

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Of the dozen or so cars parked along the gravel lot, the bumper sticker on a green mini van says it all: I love Appaloosa Butts.

From the head riding instructor who's been saddling up for nearly 20 years to the rider-in-training who until two lessons ago had never even wrapped her fingers around reins everyone here loves horses — especially those appaloosas.

And it's from that love that People and Learning Services (PALS) launched its first-ever youth program that puts kids in a position otherwise off-limits to them for financial reasons: on horseback.

Before the dust even has a chance to settle around the red, white and blue bus, a shuffle of cowboy boots and gym shoes sends the grayish powder right back into the air.

"Okay, guys, you already had your snack this morning," says National Youth Sports Program team leader Eric Roberts, warning them against paying too much attention to a collection of plastic-wrapped pastries at the entrance to the horse barn.

The sports program Roberts works for provides economically disadvantaged Monroe County youth with a five-week long opportunity to play soccer, practice judo, learn life skills and more — all free of charge.

It's the program's second year on the IU campus, and its first time collaborating with PALS, and the first year of getting the kids on horseback.

The first 12 campers in the selected age group who provided proper medical documentation were accepted into the four-week PALS program. Ten-year-old Highland Park student Krystal-Ann Domaratus is one.

Until she came to PALS, she'd never ridden a horse. This day, her second week riding, she says she's still a little nervous.

Krystal-Ann is the smallest rider to enter the corridor of 10 horse stalls, where PALS intern Lindsey Bollinger is waiting.

"Remember how last week we talked about different colors and markings?" says Bollinger as Krystal-Ann's group peers into one of the stalls.



Camper Krystal-Ann Domaratus, left, PALS intern Lindsey Bollinger and campers Ben King and Peuan Thinsan watch as a horse is led from a trailer. Bollinger had just helped the children learn the parts of a horse. Staff photo by Jeremy Hogan.

The kids arrive at PALS every Friday in shifts of six, then break up into groups of three. While one group takes lessons in the horse ring, the others complete workbooks compiled by head riding instructor Holly Gorman-Cedar.

Gorman-Cedar, combining her knowledge of special education with her expertise in riding instruction, designed the program's curriculum .

By the time Krystal-Ann's group finishes writing questions in their journals, it's time to head toward the horse ring.

At the ring, the kids grab their helmets and, one by one, join horses Patty, Cody and Holly.

Krystal-Ann rides Holly — "the big girl." She steps onto a rectangular platform that emerges slowly from the floor, making the camp's smallest rider the tallest, if only for a few seconds.

She mounts the horse and with one volunteer leading and another walking alongside, the lesson begins.

The steady cooing of pigeons, and the buzz of electric fans are soon outdone by the occasional "fantastic!" from instructor Chris Holmes.

All seven PALS instructors have been certified, but only three are paid staff members.

Holmes, a physician who practices in Columbus, works 10 to 15 hours a week with PALS. She teaches campers English style riding and today's lesson includes a primer in gaits — the horse's pace.

Krystal-Ann and Holly walk along the far side of the ring and trot back toward the wooden fence where Peg Stice, a PALS trustee who's also involved with the sport's program, watches.

"She's born to ride," says Stice.

Unlike Krystal-Ann and her fellow campers, most of Holmes' students have either physical or cognitive disabilities, if not both. But she says all riders have one thing in common.

"You can take students with vulnerabilities and give them confidence to work with a 1,000-pound animal," says Holmes. "For anyone — it's a kick."

Since the 1950s, therapeutic horse riding has been used to enrich the lives of disabled riders both physically, mentally and psychologically. PALS is extensively involved in such work.

This camp, targeting kids who do not have disabilities but who might not otherwise have the opportunity to ride, is an outgrowth of that involvement.

For kids like Krystal-Ann, the program improves emotional health, self-esteem and the ability to work as part of a team.

PALS hopes to expand the program to serve 48 youth ages 6 to 18, 25 of them from local organizations now on the program's waiting list.

PALS executive director and instructor Fern Bonchek, after seeing the positive effect riding has had on both able-bodied and disabled riders, wants the same thing for all PALS programs:

"My goal is just for the program to keep going," she said.

## Open house and show

**WHAT:** Open house/horse show for the campers

**WHEN:** 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., July 16.

**WHERE:** 680 W. That Road.

For directions or other information, go to [www.palstherapy.org](http://www.palstherapy.org).

**NOTES:** PALS welcomes anyone interested in watching a lesson, volunteering, making a financial donation or donating a horse, equipment or tack. Contact Fern Bonchek:

Office/Fax: 336-2798

Barn: 824-3000

E-mail: [pals@indiana.edu](mailto:pals@indiana.edu)

People and Learning Services (PALS) is a nonprofit organization that offers therapeutic riding lessons to at-risk youth, as well as children and adults with physical, emotional and cognitive disabilities.

PALS is the only riding program in the area accredited by the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association.

Contact reporter Melanie Sims by phone at 332-4401 or by e-mail at [mjs@heraldt.com](mailto:mjs@heraldt.com).



Volunteers Amy Detwiler, left, and Laura Ruchti lead Krystal-Ann Domaratius and her horse. Staff photo by Jeremy Hogan.