



STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

Kentucky Horse Park Program Uses Horse Books and Real Horses to Promote Literacy

By Rena Baer

If there were a contest for the most understated name of a program, the Kentucky Horse Park Literacy Program would be a strong contender. Knowing how young girls can fall in love with horses after curling up with Marguerite Henry's *Misty of Chincoteague* or Walter Farley's *The Black Stallion*, it's easy to visualize this group as an organization that just unites children and books about horses, especially in the Bluegrass.

Oh, but think again, and this time think big. Really big. Envision a program aimed at all Fayette and surrounding counties' elementary school students — and at both boys and girls — that promotes literacy with not just horse books, but also live horses, live performances (one that includes a legendary race), an au-

Hall of Fame jockey Chris McCarron re-enacts a scene from the popular movie *Seabiscuit*.



BOO HAN DY



JAMES SHAMBU PHOTOS

Top, 4,800 fourth-graders fill the Alltech Arena at the Kentucky Horse Park to see an equestrian demonstration. Above, students display their enthusiasm.

thor appearance, a visit from a famous horse trainer, a chance to dress in jockey silks and goggles, and the list goes on. Think of a group of women so passionate about horses and reading that their imaginations know no limit of creative ways to open up the world of equine literature.

The endeavor started four years ago when Cabby Boone, the chairman of the board for Kentucky Horse Park Foundation, approached horse enthusiast Mollie Jameson about researching the best ways for the park's International Museum of the Horse — which was hosting the exhibit “The Gift from the Desert” — to reach out to the public. While investigating possibilities for the foundation, Jameson came upon the Black Stallion Literacy Foundation out

of Orlando, Fla.

For two years the group, which grew to include a handful of other volunteers, worked within the parameters of the Black Stallion Literacy Foundation, using its curriculum, which was developed for first- and fourth-graders and was centered around Farley's two classics, *Little Black, a Pony* and *The Black Stallion*. The



Books about horses are a core component of the literacy program.

program was very successful, but Jameson, her enthusiastic volunteers, and the Kentucky Horse Park Foundation realized, with the backdrop of the Bluegrass — Horse Capital of the World — how unique they could make the program.

“We realized it could take on a life of its own,” said Jameson.

And, so the Kentucky Horse Park Literacy Program (KHPLP) was born, with the baby hitting the ground at a full gallop. The group chose to continue its focus on first- and fourth-graders, adding a pilot third-grade program at Russell Cave Elementary School this past school year. This coming school year it also will open the program to all area first and fourth grades on a first-come, first-serve basis rather than continuing to target the same elementary schools it had in the past.

Last year nearly 900 first-graders received their own hard-bound version of Meghan McCarthy’s *Seabiscuit the Wonder Horse*. Living in the epicenter of Thoroughbred country, KHPLP had wanted to introduce a book about racing, and the story of one of history’s most legendary races provided all kinds of creative opportunities.

They visited the school not just with books in tow, but a live horse, hobby horses for the youngsters to ride, jockey silks for them to try on, and a set of racing goggles for each to take home. To commemorate the occasion, the group brought along some



JAMES SHAMBRU



JAMES SHAMBU PHOTOS

From left, program volunteers Ashton Moynihan, Laura Klumb, and chairwoman Mollie Jameson

racing and winner's circle photo boards with the jockeys' heads cut out so the kids could stick in their own giggling faces and have their photos taken.

Jameson tells the story of one little boy whose family had just moved to the United States so his dad could work on a horse farm. The child knew very little English but was shaking with excitement over the visit. As soon as he had the opportunity, he made a beeline to the jockey silks from WinStar Farm, where his dad worked.

"This was his day to shine," said Jameson. "When he rode the [hobby] horse, you could tell that in his mind he was really there, in a race."

The fun did not end with the visit. A month later all the first-graders were invited to the Kentucky Horse Park for an event carefully orchestrated just for them — a re-enactment of the 1938 match race between Seabiscuit and War Admiral, with former Hall of Fame jockey Chris McCarron playing George Woolf, who rode Seabiscuit in the race.

"As soon as we picked out a Thoroughbred racing book, we determined we'd have a live re-enactment of the race," said Ashton Moynihan, a volunteer with the program who has been involved with horses since she was a little girl.

KHPLP turned to the community for support and were overwhelmed by the response, she said. Businesses and individuals not only contributed money but also loaned an antique car from the 1930s for the occasion, costumes and music from the same

time period, and original footage from the race. Keeneland Library also pulled all of its old photos of Seabiscuit to display for the occasion.

KHPLP also managed to find the perfect bookends for the performance — a welcome from Kentucky's first lady Jane Beshear and a closing act by trainer Dan James of Double Dan Horsemanship.

"Everyone had so much fun, even all the volunteers," said Moynihan. "The thank-you notes we got were priceless."

Teachers were also provided resource books, developed by the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association, of educational activities to supplement their curriculum and teach students about the horse industry.

Meanwhile, nearly 4,800 fourth-graders were all sent a paperback copy of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*, which had come out as a movie about the same

time. Teachers also were provided an accompanying on-line curriculum developed by the American Museum of Natural History in conjunction with its "The Horse" exhibit, which was appearing at International Museum of the Horse at the time.

The fourth-graders were then invited to the Kentucky Horse Park's Alltech Arena to see *The Book Report*, a play written, produced, and acted by the employees and volunteers of the park



Reading about horses can be a lot more appealing when real horses are close by.



BOD HARRY PHOTOS

"Seabiscuit" makes a school visit and welcomes enthusiastic pats from students.

itself. The play was about two teachers discussing an outstanding book report a student had written on *War Horse*. As the two teachers narrated their discussion, the scenes came alive on the stadium floor.

"There's a scene where the horse played hurt, and the students were so engaged and quiet that it was almost eerie," said Jameson.

"From the beginning when we were showing clips of a real war horse, Sgt Reckless, from the Korean War, you could feel the electricity," added Moynihan.

While first lady Beshear, an avid horsewoman, once again welcomed the crowd on horseback, trainer James once again closed it with a rousing display of his horsemanship that included him standing astride two horses as they cantered around the arena.

"As he was leaving, it was like Justin Bieber was in the house," said Moynihan. "The kids were cheering and lining up to slap hands with him."

This past year KHPLP also added a pilot third-grade program at Russell Cave Elementary, using the book *Goliath — Hero of the Great Baltimore Fire* by Claudia Friddell, based on a true story. Jameson said they wanted a heartfelt story with beautiful illustrations and were thrilled when they found those in *Goliath*. They were even more thrilled when the author, a first-grade teacher from Baltimore, agreed to come down and read and discuss the book with the third-grade students at Russell Cave, which was chosen because many children of horse farm employees go to school there.

The visit was later followed by a trip to the horse park, where the students were the inaugural visitors to the brand new Kids' Barn. They were the first youngsters to try out the many interactive exhibits

set up in stalls sponsored by different businesses. Each stall provides hands-on experiences such as practicing braiding the tail of a horse or looking for unsafe items in a stall or exploring an equine hospital. Afterward, the kids enjoyed a lunch made especially for them.

To raise the funding needed for the test program, Jameson said they asked horse farms in the area, and every single one gave to the cause. If KHPLP can continue to find the means, it will continue to provide the program and, if possible, expand it to other area third grades.

"We'd love to open all our programs to as many students as possible, but each year we have to raise 100 percent of the money to support them through private donations," said Laura Klumb, executive director of the Kentucky Horse Park. "Our first priority is the first and fourth grades, but we hope to continue with and expand the third-grade program."

In addition to its mission at area schools, KHPLP also has reached out to patients at



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The pages literally come alive for this young student.

the UKHealthCare Kentucky Children's Hospital, Toys for Tots, and the Bluegrass Farms Charities, providing donated books and other items to these organizations.

Last school year KHPLP ordered enough books to qualify for a Scholastic Books program that allowed the organization to donate 2,120 Scholastic books on any subject. The group settled on sending the books to elementary school students in Clay County, the third-poorest school district in the nation. Amazingly, said Jameson, the district had almost exactly that number of students. They also brought two horses out to the students on a day when the temperature dropped into the 30s and it poured rain.

"They loved it anyway," said Jameson. "It doesn't get any better than kids and horses. "And, we need both of them to succeed in the commonwealth."

And, there's nothing like reading a good horse book to set things in motion. 🐾