

## Diary of an Adult Riding Camper

Friday, March 09, 2007

By Susan F. Harris

### How It All Began

I'm 54 years old and going to camp! Some of my friends said "Whaaaaat?" However, those who ride probably don't see what's so unusual about it since adult riding camps are somewhat commonplace.

I participated in my first adult riding camp several years ago. It was loads of fun, I made lasting friendships, and it really helped my riding skills. I'd wanted to do a camp again for the longest time.

I was working one day in mid-October, 2006 at my job as Saddle Horse Report's Online Editor, when I received a news brief to post on the web site. It was a notice about Renee Biggins's Adult Riding Camp scheduled for the first weekend in March, 2007. Aha! Almost before the news was posted, I was on the phone to ask Renee about the camp. That was all I needed; a check was in the mail the next day.

Having been somewhat inactive since breaking my ankle in January, 2006, this would be the perfect incentive - and give me plenty of time - to get in better shape and lose some excess pounds. It was a good **idea**.

A letter arrived after the first of the year providing a detailed schedule for the three-day camp. The planned activities and riding time all looked great. This would be fun!

As March 2 loomed on the horizon, I began to doubt the wisdom of going to this camp. First, I never started my workout regime and had not done much better with my weight loss program. Second, my current show horse had been sent out of state on consignment, and I wasn't anticipating having a horse to ride or show this year. Third, I had been warned more than once that Renee's riding camps are boot camps. Yikes! But hey, the payment was sent... no more excuses! Since we'd be riding three days in a row, and I had only one pair of jods that fit, I called World Champion and ordered a couple of extra pairs of jods. I was ready.

On Thursday afternoon, March 1, I pulled into the parking lot of Shelbyville, Ky.'s Best Western and spied the marquee announcing "Welcome Riding Camp Guests." How nice! I checked in and asked the desk clerk if she could tell me others who were there for the camp. She had only a handful of names and I didn't know any of them. That was okay; it would be fun to meet new people. But rather than trying to find fellow campers, I spent the rest of the evening on my laptop catching up on work since I'd spent a work day to drive to Kentucky from North Carolina.

### Day One – Friday, March 2

Friday dawned bright and sunny and not too cold. I went to the hotel's breakfast area and looked for tell-tale jods and boots among the early risers. Not seeing any, I asked out loud, "Are there any riding campers here?" Three women immediately responded. They were from CA and ride with Anne Speck and Jim Bennett. After brief introductions, I was already feeling less trepidation.

As soon as I walked into the lounge at Biggins Stables, I saw stacks of a competitor magazine on the coffee table. Oh boy! (Note to self: bring a bundle of SHRs next year) The next thing I noticed were a few people I had met before. Whew!



*Renee Biggins welcomes the new campers.*

At 9:30 sharp, Renee welcomed us all and reviewed the schedule. We took turns introducing ourselves, where we were from, who we rode with, and what we were hoping to get from the camp. The 21 campers ranged in age from early 20's to "mature" and covered the spectrum when it came to riding and show experience. We came from California, the Carolinas, Chicago, Nashville, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky and even included Biggins customers. Several were repeat campers. When it came to our expectations there were the predictable responses of getting in shape for show season, working on legs, seat, etc. One person got an appreciative laugh when she said her trainers were afraid to let her ride in a full bridle and canter. Renee promised to let her do both. One camper wanted to be the "best" when camp was done, a lofty goal. Several campers said they had ridden even less than I had over the past year. Another silent "whew!"

Renee had already made the riding assignments and distributed the day's schedule. We were divided into five groups of mostly four each. We were scheduled to ride in half-hour sessions twice each day. Since I was in Group 5, I had plenty of time to observe the earlier sessions and was impressed with the amount of time Renee spent with each rider.



*The first group mounts up.*



*Renee Biggins helps Yin You with her leg position.*

My first horse was Gypsy, a bay gelding. Before I had barely made one circuit of the arena, Renee was making major changes in my leg and foot position. It was awkward at first, especially with my stiff, stubborn right leg and foot (the previously broken ankle), but as I worked on it, it came more easily. The first half hour seemed to stretch on interminably. At the end of that session I thanked Gypsy for taking such good care of me and stiffly slid out of the saddle. If I was this tired after one half-hour could I make through three days?

Late in the day, I mounted Bebe for my second session. This was a FUN horse. Her easy gaits allowed me to concentrate on my legs and seat position. The half-hour flew by. I was feeling much better about my likelihood of surviving the entire camp.

One of the features, besides riding, of the Biggins Adult Camp is the opportunity to meet some legends in the industry and learn from their experiences. Redd Crabtree was our guest speaker on Friday afternoon. Rather than prepared remarks, he encouraged questions from the group. He covered the gamut from favorite gaited horses (Skywatch) to judging to breeding and training. Although he claimed not to have a favorite from among those he has personally trained and showed – he likened it to not having a favorite child – he did talk at length about CH Admiral's Mark. Redd seemed to enjoy the visit every bit as much as we did; he even stayed beyond his allotted time.



*Redd Crabtree was a popular guest speaker.*



*Jimmy and Helen Robertson joined the campers for dinner.*

For dinner we went to Asian Buffet where I ate frog legs for the first time. They were delicious! Jimmy and Helen Robertson joined us for dinner and shared observations about the Saddlebred industry. With little prompting they reminisced about Jim B and CH Santana's Sage, a pair this writer saw receive a standing ovation at Asheville one year. Jimmy put in a plug for Devon, a show that should not be lost to the Saddlebreds and Hackneys. In talking about the state of the industry and registration numbers being down or at best flat, Jimmy said he wasn't too worried about it... although he's encouraged by the young trainers that are entering the business, if we had 2,000 more ASBs being born each year, who would train them? Hmmm.

### **Day Two – Saturday, March 3**

It snowed all day! Never enough to even show up on the ground, but it added a nice touch to the weekend.



*The campers were fascinated by all they saw and learned at Equine Services.*

We met at the crack of dawn (actually 8:00 a.m.) to trek over to nearby Equine Services Surgical Hospital where we joined Jo Cornell's campers for a tour. Dr. Richard Griffin was our informative guide. The centerpiece of the tour was the state of the art MRI machine that we learned is the only one of its kind in the world. Its magnet can rotate 90 degrees and can even do a stifle. Later Dr. Scott Bennett explained that the new technology has allowed them to find and treat injuries they never knew even existed.



*(left) Dr. Richard Griffin talks about the new MRI machine.  
(right) Dr. Scott Bennett explains MRI images.*

I was impressed with the sophistication of the questions that came from the group. These people know a lot about their own horses' health, or at least enough to ask intelligent, probing questions.

We spent the rest of the morning at Alliance Stud where we learned all about breeding and embryo transfer, from A to Z. Dr. Thompson even palpated a mare for us. For anyone who isn't familiar with this, it's a rather indelicate process. Out of courtesy to the vet and the mare, no photos were taken at this point of the tour.



*Dr. Thompson shows Strawberry Pie's follicle on the ultrasound screen at Alliance Stud.*



*Danette Musselman explains the stallion collection process.*

Danette Musselman and her staff then brought out two of the nineteen stallions standing at Alliance. We saw a spectacular yearling by Call Me Ringo and a one-week-old foal by Rifles And Roses. By popular request, Moses the camel was brought out for petting. At less than a year old, he is becoming a well-known fixture at Alliance.



*Ashley Isenhower shows off a 7 day old foal.  
(Rifles & Roses x Mayday Masquerade)*



*Moses is always a popular attraction at Alliance.*



*The Biggins group appreciated the hospitality  
of Danette Musselman and Dr. Scott Bennett*

After lunch on our own (when in Shelby County, one simply HAS to eat fried chicken at Claudia Sanders), it was back to Biggins Stables for a marathon afternoon of riding... five straight hours with no breaks for Renee. What an iron woman!

My first mount of the day will remain unnamed, but I had a terrible time getting in sync with this horse's trot. At the end of the session, despite Renee's encouragement, I was feeling rather demoralized. My second session with my old friend Gypsy helped restore my confidence.

One of the biggest luxuries of the entire camp was the services of massage therapist Aaron Strode. He came in for the last couple of hours of the afternoon and helped loosen up stiff back, neck, and arm muscles. Even though I didn't finish riding until 6:00, Aaron cheerfully stayed until every rider had his or her turn.

Our guest speaker was Bud Willimon, farrier extraordinaire. He answered a lot of questions pertaining to shoeing and soundness.



*Bud Willimon talked to the campers about shoeing.*



*Everyone enjoyed the camp's camaraderie.*

Dinner at the Old Stone Inn in Simpsonville was wonderful! The musician in our dining room even got us all singing "Stewball was a racehorse" along with him. It seems that this is THE place to be on Saturday nights if you are in the Saddlebred business. The first people we saw when we walked in the door were Don Spear and Rob Byers. As we looked around we kept seeing more and more Saddlebred folk. From this North Carolinian's perspective, it was unusual to see so many horsemen in one place and not during a horse show. That's life in Shelby County.



*Reneaux Collins and her son Wynter*



*Dinner at the Old Stone Inn*

By the way, I had frog legs again! Is this a Kentucky thing?

### **Day Three – Sunday, March 4**

I'd guess that I was not the only camper who was a bit slow and stiff getting out of bed Sunday morning. I actually entertained the idea of riding only one session today and heading home early.

The night before, Renee gave each of us a chance to request horses for our last rides. Being the generous person I am (hah!) I told her names of three horses I didn't want to ride, but otherwise, I'd let her pick horses that she felt would be well-suited for what I needed to work on. On second thought, I remembered the name of one horse that everyone had raved about. "Could I possibly ride Cody?"

When I arrived at the barn, I found that not only did I get to ride Cody once, but twice! As soon as I hit the saddle, I felt right at home. Cody had such a nice square trot and smooth canter, I could easily focus on my riding. My first experience riding Cody was so positive, there was no way I would pass up my last ride of the camp. The second ride was every bit as good as the first, and I actually felt almost fresher at the end than when I started two days ago.



*The writer on Cody*

As the morning turned into afternoon, campers began their departures one by one. We all had developed a bond through our shared experience and it was tough to say farewell. I stopped in the office and noticed a notepad on the end of the desk. Someone had started a sign-up sheet for next year's camp. It had nearly everyone's names on it. I didn't hesitate to add mine.



*A group shot on the last day*

### **Postscript**

Oh, man! Am I sore! Not just my legs, but my back, my neck, my rib cage, my tail bone, and no telling what else. Was it worth it? You bet... and then some!

Looking back at my experience, I can truthfully say that Biggins Stables Adult Riding Camp is one of my best-ever riding experiences. There was a perfect balance between riding and non-riding activities. The other campers were terrific people. Renee has wonderful school horses.

I cannot leave out praise of Renee's staff, Miguel and Jennifer. They had every horse ready on time for every session with the correct saddle every time. When 42 lessons were being given each of three days, staying on schedule is critical. Miguel and Jennifer made it happen.

And then there's Renee. Another camper said it better than I could when Stacy Vance posted this on an Internet discussion board, "Renee is a wonderful instructor and person. Her enthusiasm is terrific.

I rode in the last session Friday and Saturday and got just as much energy and enthusiasm as the first group. She has so much passion for what she does." Amen.

I'll close by saying that there are a lot of wonderful adult riding camps all across the country. You don't have to go to Kentucky; look for a camp in your own neck of the woods. I strongly encourage every adult rider to "just do it!"