



Town Crier

A weekly newspaper serving the Mackinac Island Community

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Horses and Riders Learn Techniques To Build Confidence and Trust

"Talk about a challenge. It's like trying to get a two-year-old kid to do something." - Leanne Brodeur

By Kerri Jo Molitor



At right: Katy Penney tries to bring Tex closer to batteryoperated toy weasels. They roll and jump erratically, action that frightens the horses. Tex kept his distance.

Horses are frightened of two things, says Kim Veenstra, those things that move and those that don't. Her job, therefore, as director of the Mobile Confidence Clinic held on Mackinac Island last week, was to teach riders how to develop a trusting relationship with their horses, which, in turn, will build confidence in the horse.

She starts every clinic with a lecture, explaining how riders should act whenever their horses are frightened. The focus is

on the rider learning how to be a good leader for the horse. When the horse views the rider as an effective leader and trusts the rider, it is much easier to convince the horse it is safe.

"It's not that they're never going to be scared, but to teach them how to be scared," Mrs. Veenstra said.

Her clinic was held Wednesday, June 24, at Great Turtle Park, for 4-H Club members in the morning and for adults in the afternoon.

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She teaches both horse and rider how to handle anything that might frighten a horse, and to do this, she builds an obstacle course full of objects both unfamiliar and potentially frightening to a horse. Her supplies include a large inflatable soccer ball, balloons, pool noodles, a radio, battery operated toys, and a plastic curtain cut into strips that brush the horse's head while the horse is walking under it.



After repeated attempts to go under the curtain, Leanne Brodeur and her horse, Windigo, follow Katy Penney and her horse, Tex, to the curtain. Windigo had a difficult time with the curtain, which brushes the horses' heads as they go under. By following Tex, Ms. Brodeur hoped to make the obstacle easier. (Video of the exercise is available free at the Town Crier's Web site, www.MackinacIslandTownCrier.com.)

With training, Mrs. Veenstra said, a horse can learn to stay still and listen for reassurance from the rider, instead of bolting when, say, a balloon flies by.

The most important thing for the riders to learn, she said, is not to push a horse too far when scared. Otherwise, the rider will lose her status as the leader.



At right: Ann Levy and her horse, Lars, stare at the formidable puddle of water at the Mobile Confidence Clinic Wednesday, June 24. The puddle of water, said instructor Kim Veenstra, is like a hole in the ground to horses. The clinic's goal is to instill confidence in

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horses around unfamiliar objects. In the background, Lisa Brock and her horse, Rosie, approach pool noodles hanging from poles to simulate branches and other objects brushing against a horse's side.

Some of the more difficult obstacles in the course include a puddle of water constructed from a piece of canvas

contained by a wood frame. The goal of this exercise is to get the horse to walk through the puddle, but horses tend to think the puddle is a hole in the ground, she said, and want to walk around it.

One of the more challenging obstacles she brings are toy weasels. Sitting inside discshaped sleds, these battery operated toys are a round ball with a furry tail. They roll and jump erratically, which is what scares the horses, Mrs. Veenstra said.

The toy weasels were the most difficult obstacle for 16- year-old Katy Penney and her 17- year-old horse, Tex. Tex didn't have much trouble with any of the other obstacles, but was skittish when she led him near the weasels, Miss Penney said.

Other horses were more leery of the curtain. Leanne Brodeur and her horse, Windigo, spent a long time at the curtain, but in the end, Windigo finally bolted through it. He improved the next few times they tried, going through the curtain in less time and more calmly.

"Talk about a challenge," Ms. Brodeur said. "It's like trying to get a two-year-old kid to do something."

Lisa Brock and her horse, Rosie, had difficulties with the puddle of water, but she did have some success with the pool noodles and the curtain, thanks to the help of Mrs. Veenstra.

Lars, owned by Ann Levy, is usually a calm horse, but he seemed to have more trouble than some of the more highstrung horses, Mrs. Levy said. In the end, she said, Lars lived up to the challenge.

The kids in the 4-H Club, who completed the course earlier in the day, "handled their horses very well," she noted.

The riders who spend a long time on each obstacle, really working with their horse, get more out the clinic than those who rush through it, noted Marcel Veenstra, who helped his wife at the clinic.

"They struggle and struggle," he said. "The neatest thing is seeing those tough ones accomplish that goal at the end of the day."

A resident of Brighton, this was the first time on Mackinac Island for Mrs. Veenstra. She was invited here by the Mackinac Island Horsemen's Association and the 4-H Club.