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## Horse Soccer League meets with Peter Nielsen

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The round, black and white soccer ball was rolling quietly from one end of the sand indoor arena to the other. Long, muscled legs carefully pursued it and connected with repeated kicks until a goal was scored as cheers rang out.

Sound familiar?

But, this isn't like any soccer game you've ever seen before. The ball is a massive 40 inches round and the players are women and men on horseback.

"Typically, we have three to four people on a team with 1 goalie and 2 linesmen," explained Kim Veenstra, coach and owner of the Confident Horse program. "I rotate the linesmen so there is only one rider taking the ball down to the field at a time."

Veenstra has been using the soccer ball in her Confident Horse clinics for years. At an obstacle course last year, Sheila Cook was having so much fun that she suggested starting a soccer team. Berwyck Saddle Club owner Pattie Perushak of Milford Township was approached with the idea for Saturday or Sunday practices.

The result was the beginning of a brand new horse sport in Michigan, the Michigan Horse Soccer League.

"There is a league in Arizona, so we use some of their rules, and made up some of our own," Veenstra said. "Safety is our main concern for both horses and riders."

Peter Nielson of WXYZ-Channel 7's "Peter's Principles," a program geared to improve the health and wellness of people's lives, dropped by to film the horse soccer league for an upcoming special.

"Think out of the box," said Nielson. "Fitness can be plain, simple fun even with an 1,100-pound animal."

“From the back of a horse, some people who are older or have limited mobility can improve their balance, strength and fitness in amazing ways.”

He paused, thoughtfully.

“I ride a motorcycle with a brake and accelerator — but, with a horse, there is an invisible contract of trust. It’s so awesome.”

The league is open to new members ages 18 and older. There are two teams with a total of 10 women and two men.

Any breed is welcome, including gaited, quarter horses, drafts — and any size. The only qualification is successfully completing a confidence class that helps the horse and rider develop better communication.

The techniques and camaraderie of horse soccer is good for any age participant. If the league is successful, Veenstra intends to start a junior program.

“We don’t let anyone steal the ball,” Veenstra explained. “There is no confrontation between the horses, therefore no aggressive behavior.”

She has intentionally created a noncompetitive, confidence-building experience.

“I can’t imagine my life before horses,” explains Jeanie Kelleher of Milford. “I went for 25 years not riding. I was going to tea parties and coffee klatches with friends. Then, in my late 40s, I met some women trail riders who encouraged me. Now I am having the time of my life.”

Kelleher thought adding a small stroke of competition might be fun.

“I can be with my girlfriends and have a little game of soccer and we root for everybody, but there is also an incentive to do well.”

As an added benefit, “My physical strength and mental health is better. I’m not sitting around getting old watching TV.

If every woman knew the secret that we have, every horse would be sold and there would be so many women getting out riding.”

Only a few years ago, Kelleher was diagnosed with the beginning stages of osteoporosis.

Her doctor warned her not to ride because bouncing might be bad for her back. She rode anyway.

“My doctor now recognizes that the constant motion helps to build bone mass — and I no longer have a problem,” she said.

Wishing more women knew about the joys of the riding on the horse soccer team, Kelleher said, “Riding is quickly becoming the fastest growing female sport; it’s mushrooming.”

“Not only is it good for the core and balance, but being on the back of a horse is the best psychotherapy there is; we call it barn therapy.”

She preaches that riding is the answer for middle-aged women.

“Don’t be depressed — forget about your troubles. Get healthy and get outside, breathe the fresh air and make new friends. This is like a tea party with benefits!”