

Diary Of An Adult Camper, Chapter II

by Susan F. Harris

I had such a terrific experience at Renee Biggins's Adult Riding Camp last year that there was no question I would be attending riding camp again in 2008. I assumed that I would return to Renee's camp, but an alternative opportunity captured my imagination a few months ago.

Naples, Fla., in January...80 degree temps... palm trees...shopping and dining extraordinaire... and horses! What's not to love? This would be "Saddle Up In the Sun – Adult Saddle Seat Clinic" at Bobbin Hollow Equestrian Center.



The Henry family (l to r) Louise Henry, Lark Henry, "Grandma" Vivian Henry, Scott Shepard, Marsha Shepard and Woody Henry.

Being an avid snow skier, I had not had a "warm weather" vacation in many years. Add to the mix that I received a strong response to my "Diary of an Adult Camper" last year, I decided it would be in the fitting "journalistic spirit" to attend a different camp in 2008.

I had only met Bobbin Hollow's Lark Henry in person briefly during the 2007 show season, but we had spent quite a bit of time corresponding by e-mail over the past few years. Lark's energy and enthusiasm is completely contagious and made the choice even easier.

I received a brochure and other material from Bobbin Hollow describing the adult clinic. Not only would we ride twice a day, but a beach barbeque, sunset cruise, massage therapist and other goodies were part of the package. The focus of the clinic itself seemed to be placed on individualized attention to our riding goals.

As I began to fill out the very detailed questionnaire, I started thinking just how meticulous Lark was. Little did I know!

A roster of participants was sent out about a month before the clinic. I recognized a few of the names, but didn't really know any of the other women. Yes, our small group was all women. Since Bobbin Hollow trains both Morgans and Saddlebreds, I was curious as to how many of each would be represented in the clinic. We continued to receive e-mails from Lark in the weeks leading up to the clinic with reminders, tips and encouragement.

PLAYING TOURIST

I left for Naples a couple of days in advance of the clinic so I would have time to "play tourist." Whenever I travel, especially to a new place, I always carefully study local web sites ahead of time to plan my extracurricular activities. For the first time ever, I set off for Naples completely unprepared. I had not even looked at a map to see where Naples was in relation to the Ft. Myers airport. For this and other reasons, Saddle Up In The Sun was going to be a true adventure.

Having just purchased a brand new MMX saddle, I had to take it with me. Not willing to check it, I schlepped my saddle through two airports along with my laptop in a backpack. Ugh. I'm getting too old for this. However, eager anticipation kept me going. Note to self: Find a Pack-N-Ship to send saddle home.

After picking up my rental car, I studied my newly acquired map and headed south to Naples. It was only a few miles from the airport that I found my first diversion - Miromar Outlet Center. Do I stop now or come back tomorrow? The outlet center proved to be an irresistible temptation. At the next exit I turned around and went back. With stores like Michael Kors, Perry Ellis, Worth, Escada, Movado, Crabtree & Evelyn, and many, many more, it was well worth it. Believe me.

If you like Italian cuisine and/or fresh seafood, you'll not go hungry in Naples. After checking in, I went to a wonderful Italian restaurant near the hotel. Since I was dining alone, I used the time to peruse the visitors' guides and plan my one free day.

On Thursday I discovered that New York doesn't have the only Fifth Avenue. Naples' Fifth Avenue is one of the local centers for shopping, art galleries and dining, along with the famed Third Street neighborhood. Window shopping, walking on the beach, cruising by beautiful residential waterfront homes made for a full day. I opted for a seafood dinner on the Naples Bay waterfront. Calling my husband from my open-air table, I told him that I'd died and gone to heaven. He replied plaintively, "Without me?" Guess who's coming to Naples next year?

Upon returning to the hotel, I found that the Bobbin Hollow staff had left welcome bags for each of us containing all sorts of practical goodies and a complete weekend itinerary. Lark left no detail unattended.



Saddle Up In The Sun 2008 - Inaugural Class

DAY ONE – JAN. 11

On Friday, I woke up to a gorgeous blue sky and warm weather... heaven in the tropics! Heading into the hotel's breakfast area, I met several of my fellow clinic participants. We were all eager to get started.

As I drove into Bobbin Hollow, an

equine oasis located just off a busy thoroughfare, I wondered how it happened to be in Florida. I have to digress a bit here to give a little history of Bobbin Hollow for those who might not know. A three-generation family operation with a rich heritage, Bobbin Hollow built its foundation in the Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts. Founded by Woodrow Sr. and Vivian Henry, AMHA Hall of Famers, Bobbin Hollow operated a famed summer camp as well as its noted equestrian show program in Amherst for many years. Indeed, Bobbin Hollow alumni continue to stay in touch with the Henry family. Son, Woody, moved the family to Florida in 1989 and became a charter boat captain for a time. However, horses were in his blood, and the current incarnation of Bobbin Hollow was born in the 1990s. It is still very much a family affair with third generation Lark Renee Henry as manager/instructor/trainer, and her mom and dad, Louise and Woody, continuing to instruct and train.

Lark welcomed the 12 of us, introduced the Bobbin Hollow staff and gave us a general rundown on the day's schedule. She excitedly announced two guest instructors who were "sneaking out of retirement" to augment the regular Bobbin Hollow staff – Marsha (Henry) Shepard, retired trainer/equitation instructor/show judge, and Bonnie Byrne, retired world champion trainer.

The clinic participants were equal parts Saddlebred and Morgan riders, ranging in age from "youthful" to "mature," and in experience from academy to a reserve world's champion. For the first morning, we were divided into four groups for rotating introductory sessions so the staff could get a feel for our individual needs. The clinic was truly a "three-ring circus" in that there were three rings in concurrent use each day. Louise conducted vaulting lessons in the dressage ring, Woody held court in the "west" ring and Lark and Marsha conducted riding lessons in the "east" ring. Individual videos were offered as an option, and most of us took advantage of the opportunity.



Niki Varveris explained how yoga can be an aid to riding improvement.

When I heard the word “vaulting” my antenna went on high alert. I couldn’t imagine turning flips, standing on the back of a horse, or any of the other tricks that came to mind. Not to worry. Our vaulting lessons consisted of riding a very quiet lesson horse on a lunge line with a vaulting strap (with handles for emergencies). Louise had us jogging and cantering while we did stretching and other exercises, with arms outstretched. My biggest surprise was how much the bareback riding stretched the inner thigh muscles. Also, while I felt comfortable and balanced riding counter-clockwise, I was completely off balance when I reversed. What a humbling experience!



Lark introduced Bonnie Byrne to the group.

My next session was a driving lesson with Woody. Now this is something I’m comfortable doing. No simple lesson horse for us. We had the privilege of driving Celebrity Marquee, the reigning world’s champion junior exhibitor park harness horse! Of course, Woody had to remind me that he was not a road pony and to slow down from a road gait to a jog.

With my confidence restored, my third morning session was a riding lesson with Lark. As soon as I was seated on the horse, staff photographer Jen Anderson shot photos from each side and (gasp) behind. The reason for these photos would not be revealed until the final day. In another lunge lesson, this time with a saddle, Lark and I worked on leg position, and “feeling my core.” Lark made the lessons fun with more stretching exercises including throwing tennis balls for us to catch from the saddle. It was interesting to observe that many of Lark’s tips for riders were very similar to tips I used to teach in skiing with regard to balance, weight and feeling our core.

After we all completed our three rotations, we broke for a delicious lunch served on the covered porch in front of the barn. After lunch we had small group sessions. I was assigned to a Saddlebred named Buddy Bonkers and rode with Woody in the west ring. My group included Mary Adams and Peggy Councilman, also riding Saddlebreds. My horse was aptly named, at times being my “buddy” and other times being a bit “bonkers.” In reality, he was fun to ride, a challenge at times with a motor that constantly revved.

After everyone completed afternoon lessons, we were invited to partake in “high tea.” This was the real thing with china teacups, scones, and all. While relaxing over tea, Marsha shared her experiences as a horse show judge with the group.

For the evening, we ventured a few miles north to Bonita Beach. Fellow camper, Mary Adams, graciously hosted cocktails and a buffet dinner in her beachfront condo with an eye-popping view.



Louise Henry teaching a vaulting lesson.

DAY TWO – JAN. 12

Saturday morning dawned warm and sunny. The day’s schedule included private and semi-private lessons for everyone. Before beginning, Lark introduced us to legendary trainer Bonnie Byrne. Originally from Illinois, Bonnie is now retired and lives at nearby Sanibel Island. I was excited to see my assignments—two private lessons with Bonnie. What luck!

My first lesson was aboard a four-year-old Saddlebred named Roman Knight who is being schooled to be a lesson horse. He was cute and cocky, but a bit green. We worked more on schooling Knight than on my equitation. As I caught on to what Bonnie was asking me to do, I was able to give Knight clearer signals, and he responded better and better. Funny how that works! This was a really fun horse to ride.

After another scrumptious lunch, compliments of Ellen Paterson, a Bobbin Hollow instructor who is married to a chef, we were energized for our afternoon rides.

My second horse was a Saddlebred named Lil, a descendant of one of Woody’s former show ring champions. Lil had a motor, and I had to work on rating her as well as my own form. Bonnie worked with me on keeping my upper body relaxed and sinking my weight down through my heels and keeping my legs back under me, all at the same time. At the canter, we worked on keeping a deep but soft seat while not letting my upper body rock.

Then high tea again and the massage! The clinic offered the services of a massage therapist all three days. One of the stalls was even converted into a private massage sanctuary. We each had the chance to sign up for one or more half-hour massages with Victoria Eagle.

After hustling back to the hotel for the quickest shower in history, it was on to a sunset cruise aboard the Sweet Liberty, a 53’ catamaran. We motored through Naples Bay out to the Gulf of Mexico where the sails were unfurled. Our captain kept us entertained and informed with tidbits about the communities we were passing and astounding information about the local real estate market. Two highlights of the cruise included spotting dolphins and a bald eagle. The cruise was relaxing and a perfect way to end the day. On reaching shore, our group split up and went different directions for dinner. My companions and I chose Campiello’s, a fabulous Italian restaurant with an open-air courtyard that made us feel like we were in the original Napoli.

DAY THREE – JAN. 13

The weather report called for rain, but luckily it held off. At 9, we posed for the ubiquitous group photos. For our last day, Lark asked each of us for our preference. Instead of taking the easy way out and requesting my favorite horse, I chose to work on the skill with which I had had the most difficulty—vaulting. On the first day, my introduction to vaulting was only 10 minutes. This final lesson would be a



Lark Henry conducting a lesson.

half-hour. Upon mounting the horse, I could tell the previous days’ work had loosened me up. I definitely felt more relaxed and limber. Louise worked with me on stretching and balance. Overall, it was a positive experience and confidence booster. And Louise had infinite patience.

In between final lessons (and suit fittings with Marsha), we found out the purpose of those first-day posture photos. Niki Varveris, a Bobbin Hollow customer and physical therapist, used the photos to develop individual posture analyses for each of us along with a recommended yoga workout. She also met with us individually to explain her evaluations.

With several of the campers having early afternoon flights, we began our good-byes, hugs and promises to return the next year.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Although Bobbin Hollow regularly conducts camps and other special programs for children and even moms, this was the riding center’s first Adult Saddle Seat Clinic. It was a spectacular success. Lark and her family and staff thought of virtually everything. And if something didn’t happen exactly as planned, we never knew it.

I can’t finish without praising the Bobbin Hollow staff. Everyone was gracious and welcoming. The instructors were knowledgeable. The caretakers, Wilman Garcia and Enrique Calderon, were attentive to every detail of the horses and tack. Suzanne Donovan, center manager, made sure we had proper fitting headgear and was our all-round go-to gal. Ellen Paterson, instructor, fed us well but always in a healthy manner.

The quality of riding instruction and horses was impressive. The attention to every little detail—from videos to posture evaluations to massages to a never-ending supply of bottled water to high tea—Bobbin Hollow provided it all.

As I said last year, there are a lot of great adult camps in many areas of the country. Whether it’s Kentucky, North Carolina, Missouri, Florida, or wherever, look for a camp that fits your needs and “Just Do It.”