

BRANCHING OUT FOR *Youth*

By Megan Arszman

“In the days of modern technology most kids are brought up today playing with phones, computers, iPads, and all that stuff — they don’t care that much about the outside world as far as horses go. It’s kind of sad, but it’s true.”

AQHA Professional Horseman Ted Turner hit the nail on the head when discussing the change in numbers for youth participants in the leading equine organizations. These days there is a lot more that can pull kids in other directions, besides the barn now: soccer leagues, piano lessons, video games, computers, etc. It’s a fact that’s been noticed not only by trainers, but also the associations such as AQHA.

“Over the last several years we’ve noticed, not just AQHA, but the horse industry as a whole has had a steady decline in youth participation in youth activities. It’s sort-of been something that’s been talked about for quite a few years, that we need to do something...they need to do something...” says Todd Branson, director of youth programs at AQHA.

And while the economy can be blamed for a general decrease in equine activities across the nation, Branson agrees that the increase in options and the ease of technology these days has led youth astray from the horse industry. So AQHA tasked Branson and other youth program leaders to come up with a solution to the problem to help bring back youth participation in equine industry programs, and not just with Quarter Horses.

“Kids are getting involved in horses at a much older age (AQHYA’s average age is 15) and more active kids are between the ages of 15-19. By then, most kids in today’s generation are already consumed with soccer, dance, piano lessons, and everything else,” explains Branson.

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The focus was turned towards the younger set, ages 5-9 and 9-12, to see how they can get children to choose activities such as 4-H over soccer. “We had to try to find a way to get in front of these families and show the values of having horses in their lives,” he says.

The Unicorn or Shining Spark?

One of the most universal equine symbols can be seen in Saturday morning cartoons, on notebooks, and stickers—the unicorn. Some times that’s the first horse most children see. To them, a unicorn is magical ... and out of reach. So Branson is aiming to help that fantasy become more of a reality for younger children who might not realize riding horses can be accessible for anyone.

“Let’s go get the kids that love the unicorn, have them fall in love with the horse, and then do what we can as an association to encourage them to love the American Quarter Horse, with the generic understanding that if they fall in love with an Arabian or a Clydesdale, we are going to have the resources to push them in that direction,” he explains. “At the end of the day, more people involved in the horse industry helps everybody.”

Branson realizes that there can be a misconception that riding lessons and equine events can be way too expensive for families. “There’s some disconnect that horses are traditionally spoken of as expensive, hard to maintain, a life changer or a game changer...” he says. “All of these are negative connotations of horses. But in reality, horseback riding lessons really aren’t that different than piano lessons. You’re paying, initially, the same price to do something for the child that they love doing.”

Branson’s goal is to grab the family with the unicorn or My Little Pony lover, find a way to educate them on the authenticity of the horse as a whole, not just a sparkly, magical creature. Thus, the program would ultimately encourage the family to find a certified horseman or riding center and take that step to get on the back of a horse and fall in love with the real thing.

“Take Me Riding”

Enter the first of two new programs from the AQHA aimed to bring in families of younger children who might not have considered riding lessons over ballet lessons. Spring 2014 will see the launch of Take Me Riding, a multi-media educational program for families of kids ages 5-9.

Take Me Riding involves more than just workbooks and lesson plans, but online videos, games, and activities for families of all backgrounds. There are three video series that will portray children in authentic environments around horses, not just showing on the Quarter Horse circuit. For example, one video series follows a young girl who lives in the city, but she loves horses. After listening to his daughter beg, the father finds a place that she can take riding lessons, so she gets to go ride a horse for the first time.

“We’re trying to relate more to a younger child, while slowly educating them through games and activities that will be available through smartphones and tablets, as well as on computers,” adds Branson.

Knowing it’s hard to beat the draw and portability of technology, AQHA decided to embrace it and use technology to help get today’s youth on the back of a horse.

“They can continuously play games and do activities that are horse related, instead of just playing Candy Crush on their phone,” says Branson. “(The kids will) learn more about horses, while mom and dad can track their progress in Take Me Riding and learn about horses themselves, just to soften that next step, to make the ‘Who do I ask?’ dilemma much easier.

“We can show mom and dad that in today’s fast-paced lifestyle, it’s okay to take a night and just go horseback riding—you don’t have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to go do it. We want to do what we can for the horse industry to get as many people involved as possible.”

The Value of the Horse

Once Take Me Riding reels in the younger horse lover, what about the older crowd? AQHA is developing a program for them, too.

The association is developing a comprehensive, all breed record system that can follow kids throughout their 4-H, junior high, and high school days. It will be geared towards all youth activities, not just horses, so everything has a centralized location to display everything that they’ve done as a child to prepare them as they apply for college and apply for scholarships.

“What we’re trying to do is show the inherent value of the horse,” explains Branson. “Yes, it’s important to go show and get a blue ribbon, but it’s also equally important to know that you’re a good public speaker and a good leader, and that you’re a good contribution to society, and because of the horse this is why.”

The yet-to-be-named program is aiming at a January 2014 launch date, while Take Me Riding will launch in May of June 2014. “We want (the unnamed program) to be a project that showcases the value of keeping records and that potentially, if you have a kid that not only shows horses but shows sheep, there could be some expandability in the future,” says Branson.

A Positive Spin

The future of youth in the horse industry is already starting to look a little brighter.

For example, AQHA’s Bank of America Youth Excellence Seminar experienced a 25% increase in participation this year, with more younger members able to participate this year than in years past.

“We are at an interesting time in the horse industry, and with the implementation of our new all-breeds programs to encourage participation, we look forward to a tremendous increase in involvement in future years,” says Branson.

“I do think that the youth we’re getting will be more dedicated than they’ve been,” agrees Turner.

Branson remains upbeat about the potential of his two new programs: “Horses are such excellent partners for kids, so I am happy we are recognizing the accomplishments of children of all ages.”