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KEEN HORSE CAMP

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I sometimes wonder how kids make it in the unpredictable world of horses. I know parents want the best for their precious offspring, but I cringe when I see some of the barely-trained horses on which they put their kids.

Summer is a time of camps and all little horse crazy girls want to go to horse camp. Unfortunately too many of them are those deals where Head Wrangler leads the group down a winding trail, camp plugs walking nose to tail, while Caboose Wrangler brings up the rear talking on his cell phone. That's learning to ride? Soon the kids are bored to tears and go canoeing in the river. A few die-hard girls brush the horses and gaze longingly into the sale barn plug's eyes, envisioning galloping free on them, hair flying in the wind, two beings as one -- the thing that makes riding worthwhile.

So I was gratified to hear about a real horseman who holds kids camps in which they are actually taught horsemanship, control, equitational skills and *real riding*. *Where kids really learn*. Dan Keen grew up on a ranch in Fayette County and got a love of horses early. He started roping as a kid, then went on to competitive team roping, blacksmithing and race horse training. This combination and a understanding of horses and technique with them led him to reconditioning and retraining them.

From his ranch in Round Top and his father's ranch nearby in Ledbetter, Dan and his wife Kelley teach people and horses how to be partners, be safe, and have fun. hold clinics, weekends, retreats and camps. He trains everything from dressage warmbloods to jumpers and barrel horses. For the horse, he goes

back to a good solid foundation of listening to the rider -- he'll take a \$30,000 dressage horse and ride him around the ranch, work cattle on him, swim him through the lake and work him through his unique obstacle course. Suddenly, Mr. High Dollah is a much better riding horse. For the rider, he teaches them the basic control skills and communication and then takes them through confidence building exercises, whether it working corriente steers in the arena or going through the obstacle course.





The course is water obstacles, jumps, high hills, embankments, a board bridge and teeter totter, a shredded hanging "curtain" and a long trench the horse must walk through.

When I arrived at Double Tree Ranch on Friday I saw nine adorable girls, age 9-12, with unruly horses that had little respect for their little riders. They would pull every trick in the book, bucking, bolting, not going, not whoaing, not standing still, throwing their heads, and so on. One kid that really got to my heart was a little red-headed waif named Katie who was riding a muscly paint Mustang who knew he could out-muscle her and did at every opportunity. He had

bolted with her several times and she'd gone off him several times. She had no stop on him, and he knew it. She was fearful, for good reason.

The first thing that happened in the 3-ring circus Friday was Dan showed each girl how to get their horse to yield their head to them. First with ground work, and then with the simple one-rein lift. Mustang boy resisted of course, bowing his neck and locking up, dragging Katie around, even bringing her to tears twice, but she kept with him, and Dan kept with them, and rider and horse finally got there. It was an amazing transition. Mustang boy went from disrespect, dunking her in the pond and bolting when he saw the cows, to a whole new horse the next day: listening to her and doing what she asked with control and rate. The best part was seeing the tears and fear go to smiles on Katie's face. "You fix the little things and the big things go away," Dan told her.

"Horses are professional reactors, they're fright animals, and they want to do what they want to do," Dan explained to the girls. "We're going to teach your horse how to *think* instead of just react. I want to see you ride that horse as one. When he zigs, you zig. When he zags, you zag. You've *got to have* a good go button, a good whoa button and good speed control."

When I first saw that the camp was only three days, Friday to Sunday, and cost \$400, to be honest, I thought that was pricey. And yet, at the end of the last day, as I watched those little girls gallop their horses through an obstacle course most adults couldn't get their horses *halfway* through, and did it timed in five minutes (one of them barefoot because "my boots rub me") -- I knew it was probably the best four hundred bucks those parents ever spent. Those horses zipped when the kids said zig and zagged when they said zag. And the kids were right with them, just like real partners are....



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There are intermediate and advanced kid camps and adult weekends coming up July - Sept. Also a ladies riding retreat Sept. 14-16 at <http://www.dankeenhorsemanship.com>