

The World of Horses

Ever since the legendary John George "Kootenai" Brown, made his way by pack horse across the plains of central and southern Alberta in the mid-nineteenth century, westerners have been enamored with the romance of this majestic animal.

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Westerner Park, located on the south end of Red Deer, hosts numerous horse activities throughout the season. The upcoming Red Deer Classic Horse Show, held June 16th through to the 18th, features numerous breeds competing in a variety of classes. Beginning on Friday morning and continuing through to Sunday evening, spectators can enjoy watching any number of breeds, including Morgans, American Saddlebreds, and Arabians.

Riders in the Classic Horse Show compete in classes such as Country English Pleasure, Hunter Pleasure, or Three-Gaited Show Pleasure driving. The Saturday evening show is always a crowd favourite,




By Doris J. MacGinnon

when the spirited American Saddlebred horse performs in the Five-gaited class, and riders don Native Costume in the Arabian Mounted Class. All performances are free to the public. Many horse breeders are also on hand to answer questions about the specific breeds. For those who enjoy a more western flair to their horse activities, Westerner Park also hosts the Alberta Reining Horse Association's show and competitions from June 8 - 11. The activity of reining has a long history in Alberta. It began on the working cattle ranches, where cowboys used horses to gather, move, and hold cattle on the open range. The horses had to be athletic and responsive. Challenges often arose between riders as they put their horses through a series of stops and turns, in front of eager crowds. These early friendly displays were the forerunners of today's reining competitions, where hundreds of riders demonstrate the skills of their highly trained and conditioned horses.

Many of the competitors in these reining shows received their early training in Alberta's 4-H clubs. This organization, which grew out of the belief in the importance of home, heart, hands, and health, is familiar to many Albertans. It was established in 1917, as a boys and girls club, and grew to adopt the motto "Learn to do by Doing." The organization now includes four hundred





clubs throughout the province, which focus on many different activities and animals, including dogs, llamas, alpacas, and even bison. The 4-H organization holds its annual Regional Show at Red Deer's Westerner Park, with demonstrations always open to the public.

Aside from the general enjoyment and relaxation benefits of horses, there are therapeutic aspects which have long been recognized. The Central Alberta Special Equestrians is a volunteer-run group, dedicated to providing handicapped riders with the opportunity to feel the freedom of mobility offered by horses. The group provides riding lessons to individuals with a range of physical disabilities, and is now expanding to include youth struggling with social and emotional difficulties. Volunteers and spectators are always welcome. More information can be obtained by visiting the group's website at www.hoofbeats.com.

The enjoyment in the simple presence of horses was evident in the support recently demonstrated by the citizens of Red Deer for maintaining the presence of the horses at Heritage Ranch, located on the west end of the park system. Indeed, whether as a spectator or an active participant, central Alberta horse enthusiasts have opportunity to enjoy a wide range of activities.

Photos courtesy of Shirley Mace

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