

Dressage, casual style

Local shows focus on competition, not formality

Posted: Sunday, August 10, 2014 2:00 am

Dressage, casual style By Karen Gardner News-Post Staff

JEFFERSON — Dressage, also called horse ballet, is known for its formality. But the Frederick Area Dressage Shows (FADS) is anything but formal.

FADS, as the group dubs itself, are in its second year of listing horse shows in the Frederick County area. The difference, says founder Leslie Raulin, is that these shows offer horses and riders a casual outlet for dressage competition. Riders don't have to don fancy jackets and button-down shirts, and horses' manes don't need to be braided.

"This may be a first horse show for kids or a first show for green horses," Raulin said.

It could also be for adults who don't have the money or desire to compete on a more formal level, but want feedback from judges. Schedules are flexible, not requiring horse and rider to stay all day.

"Dressage means training," Raulin said. Dressage movements, rooted in military routines, can help a horse move better, and can help the rider focus on correct riding techniques. Western and English riders both benefit, Raulin said. Dressage trains horse and rider to use collected, controlled movements. Dressage training helps horses to use their muscles better and riders to learn to communicate with their horse using tiny, almost indiscernible movements.

Fees from the shows help local horse farms earn some extra money, and eight of this year's shows are raising money for local charities ranging from the Frederick County 4-H Therapeutic Riding Program to the Frederick Memorial Hospital Hurwitz Breast Cancer Fund. Since the group began last year, it has raised nearly \$10,000 for charity. Other beneficiaries include the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation and the Frederick County Pony Club.

It can be daunting for a horse farm to put on a dressage show, but FADS takes care of all the marketing, and the farms still earn money from fees. The organization's primary responsibility is marketing and scheduling regional shows that fit in with its casual philosophy.

"Simplicity's the big word," Raulin said. "It takes out all the red tape."

Raulin is a retired Army dentist who took lessons as a child, but didn't return to riding horses until she was 48. As an older rider, she didn't want to jump, so she began taking lessons and competing in dressage. She found she enjoyed dressage, but she didn't want to compete at a high level.

"The most I've ever done is second-level at a schooling show," she said. Dressage levels begin at training level, then progress in difficulty from first to fourth level, then to the upper level international tests.

"It's fun," Raulin said. "It's a non-stuffy approach to dressage."

For an upcoming show benefiting breast cancer patients, she is encouraging riders and horses to go pink. The only clothing requirement is that it be safe and humane, and all riders must wear safety helmets and safe riding boots.

"Serving a purpose"

Riders who are still learning can go to a show and get some constructive criticism.

Raulin's trainer, Cheryl Loane, of Thurmont, started hosting informal shows as an opportunity for schooling, an equine term for training a horse or horse and rider in formal riding techniques. These shows were bound not by rules, but by fun.

"They were very popular," Loane said. "The purpose was to bring horses for schooling in a friendly, low-key atmosphere. It really is supposed to be an educational, fun experience."

Maryland and surrounding states offers plenty of opportunities for serious competition, but these casual shows filled a niche.

Raulin started the show series in the spring of 2013. "My trainer, Cheryl, suggested a General Membership Organization (GMO) under the United States Dressage Federation (USDF). However, after further discussion, we realized we did not want to form another dressage club with rules, members, and meetings. Instead, we wanted to provide increased access to casual dressage shows in the Frederick County area," she said.

Raulin has computer skills, and she set up the website frederickdressage.org, with instructions for riders looking for shows and for farms that want to host shows.

"Never did we imagine more than 10-12 shows a year," she said. "This year, it's up to 31 shows. It's become much more popular than we expected for riders and horses. It's serving a purpose."

"We try to do flexible scheduling, so trainers and students can come in and not have to stay all day," Raulin added. At more formal shows, schedules often require riders and horses to remain at the show site for hours between classes.

The price is also affordable, Raulin said, compared to many more formal shows. Rates are set by each farm and are usually about \$25 per ride. Although each farm runs its own show, the shows are advertised on the FADS website and through FADS emails.

"Farms are getting more riders through FADS due to the marketing assistance," Raulin said. Word of mouth and a Constant Contact email list has helped FADS shows grow in number and popularity.

FADS shows are popular, but riders don't have to navigate through the crowded world of formal dressage shows. A formal show might have over 100 riders, but the biggest FADS show has been 30 riders.

"It's simple, casual, less costly, and it's fun," Raulin said. "We do this for fun. This can be a way for horse or rider to work through show nerves. We had a horse afraid to enter the arena. At a licensed show, he'd be eliminated. I walked up and talked to the horse and brought him in." That horse will get over his fear of strange arenas much more easily after a positive experience, she added.

Dressage in this country "back in the day" was centered in the Mid-Atlantic area, and many Maryland equestrians competed in dressage, said Michele Wellman, owner of By Chance Farm in Libertytown, which has hosted several FADS shows. Today, the best dressage competitors have largely shifted to Florida, but there are still plenty of people who ride dressage.

"There are people who don't have any goals to compete," Wellman said. A formal show can cost at least a couple of hundred dollars. "For a rider on a budget, that's a lot of money," she said. "These shows are a great way for your typical adult amateur who rides a few days a week to show without being overwhelmed by the cost."

On the web: www.frederickdressage.org



Frederick Area Dressage Shows founder Leslie Raulin aboard Annie, a 19-year-old German Hanoverian mare in her dressage ring on her farm near Jefferson. Staff photo by Bill Green



Sarah Dunn, riding Murphy, warms up prior to taking part in a dressage competition in Jefferson in April. Staff photo by Graham Cullen



Barbara Strawson, riding Summer Wind, takes part in an April dressage show in Jefferson. Staff photo by Graham Cullen