

There's no horsing around

By PATRICK MEYERS, Staff writer

BETHANY — It's a picturesque view. The spires of Bethany College are tucked into a soft valley below a green, wind-swept hill crowned with a group of stables and arenas. Horses and their riders can be seen meandering over the 2,800-plus acres of rolling countryside.

Is it right to call it a sanctuary, or even a cathedral for lovers of horses and horsemanship? Perhaps. But one thing is for certain: The Peace Point Equestrian Center has a hold over riders, staff and even benefactors that wouldn't easily be broken. And considering the center's growth from a mere idea seven years ago to the home of an emerging college power and mecca of equestrian sports in the eastern part of the United States, it's not hard to see the appeal.



Patrick Meyers

For the love of horses – Bethany College rider Ashley Anderson clears a fence riding Liam. Anderson, a freshman, finished second in her hunt seat division during last weekend's regional meet in Erie, Pa. She competed in this weekend's zone competition in Cranberry, Pa.

"I simply love it. I didn't realize at the time (when I applied to Bethany College) how great Peace Point is. But after I saw it I immediately fell in love with it. Right now there's nowhere else I'd rather be," said Bethany College freshman Brooke Drury, who is enrolled in the school's equestrian program. She's a member of the dressage team, which in its first year has qualified for the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association's National Championship to be held April 28-29 at Centenary College in New Jersey.

Dressage is a form of exhibition riding in which the horse is controlled in a series of difficult steps and gaits. It is one of soon-to-be four disciplines offered at Peace Point. The others are hunt seat and eventing, which are intended mostly for the college teams, and western.

In college, and even high school competitions, riders are awarded points for their place finishes. Seven points are given for first, five for second and so on. Points accumulate over the course of a season, which contributes to a rider being ranked on an overall points list. Riders can advance from meets on overall points alone.

"Eventing (a combination of dressage, fence jumping and cross-country riding) is my favorite. I'm completely thrilled that we will field a college team in it next year. I can't wait. It's an adrenaline rush," said Drury.

Drury is an upper level regional dressage champion and will compete for an individual title. She will join with her teammates — Mackenzie Pilla, Elizabeth Reidy and Maggie Soulsdy — to try for a team title. The group finished second in its region.

Another program milestone came at the end of March when hunt seat riders Ashley Anderson and Ashley Alwaniec finished second in their respective levels at the region meet in Erie, Pa. They advance to the zone meet this weekend in Cranberry, Pa.

Hunt seat is derived from the old, upper-class sport of fox hunting. At the higher levels of the discipline riders are required to jump over several fences in a technically challenging course. The riders are judged on how they sit, the approach to a jump and the horse's form, as well as the overall evenness of a routine.

And just to make things more difficult, riders are given the horses they will ride just 10 minutes prior to an event.

"They do that for every discipline and event. The philosophy behind it is they want riders to be fundamentally strong. Horses are as different as people, and it takes a truly skilled rider to sit on a horse they've never ridden before and still perform the moves that are required to do," said Peace Point Hunt Seat coach Rabo Nijenhuis. "I think our success so far shows just how fundamentally strong our riders really are."

Anderson and Alwanieac competed in the regional meet alongside Gary Cooper and Lindsey Walsh.

"I was very pleased with how well I did. I actually think we all did very well," Anderson said. "The competition was tough, very tough. It's in that type of meet that you see how far you've come. Sometimes a bad showing can really wake you up and make you depressed. But if you do well, then it's a tremendous feeling."

Peace Point's Origins and future

The tale begins with Nancy Sandercox, whose father Perry Gresham was president of Bethany College. Robert Sandercox, her husband, was on the college's board of trustees. When current trustee member Gene Valentine, co-chairman and chief executive officer of Financial West Investment Group Inc. in Westlake Village, Calif., first developed his idea for Peace Point as a means of college recruitment, the Sandercoxes recommended Ellen Fischer to be executive director.

"I've known the Sandercoxes for years. When I graduated from Bethany in 1973 I stayed in the area and established my own farm (Clairlea Farm in Claysville, Pa.). I taught their children (Megan and Alison) in Pony Club. They asked me to meet with Gene, and after one lunch meeting I was ready to do it. And I'm glad I did, because this program has been a great asset to enriching Bethany College," Fischer said.

The ground breaking began in 2001, and what has followed is growth. The first of the two indoor arenas was completed more than three years ago, with the second finished last October. Because of the arenas, Peace Point has been able to host rodeos as well as the Inner Scholastic Equestrian Association's regional meet this past weekend.

Further development of the grounds has led to Peace Point being marked as a location for American endurance sanction rides. Just last month the center was picked as a tour stop for the "Best of America by Horseback" show. The program is a weekly trail riding television series on Rural Farm Delivery-TV that highlights trail riding opportunities throughout the country. The tour is scheduled to stop at Peace Point Aug. 17-19.

The developments continue even now, as the center's team roping competitions and practices, which are open to the public, will be expanded. Girl Scout rides to earn merit badges will be continued, and Fischer said the center is looking into a therapeutic riding program.

When more money is raised a whole host of expansions will take place, according to officials. An aventing course will be mapped out during the college's offseason. Another goal is to establish a traditional fox hunt. And even condominiums could be built at the end of the process.

"We're looking at the condominiums as a time-share thing. Currently, we use bed and breakfasts. We want to use Peace Point as a camp site for children and adults," Fischer said. "For example, we're partnering with Camp Canyon (out of Florida) to come here and use the center as a camp site. We have a lot on our plate during the next two years."

The original budget called for about \$4 million in construction costs. The daily operating cost is about \$40,000, and the final project could top the \$14 million plateau before it's finished.

"I think it's been worth the investment. We have about 65 students enrolled in the college program, and 24 percent of the college's incoming class is interested in Peace Point. Then there's other services, such as being designated as a Pony Club center, that we can offer the public. Peace Point is growing rapidly, and I think it

will soon become a world-class center for horsemanship," Valentine said.

But Valentine admits that the center's success ultimately rests in the hands of everyone involved directly, or even indirectly.

Horsemanship As a culture

There is a general warm, natural feeling just under the surface of all the facts and figures. It's the intangible yet overpowering emotions, according to Drury, that prompt her to climb the hill to the stable where her own horses — Pauli and Delight — are housed, looking for a hug after a rather difficult day at school.

They were the impetus behind Pilla bringing her horse, Ganessa, all the way from Marine, Minn., to be with her, because "I love my horse. I don't know where I would be without her," Pilla explained.

It also seems that Peace Point's general care of horses has resonated beyond its boundaries, like waves on a sea. A majority of the 70 horses at Peace Point were donations made by trainers, and since the center has become the first college based Pony Club center, the horses will be put to good use.

Pony Club in itself is a world wide organization dedicated to teaching children to develop responsibility, time management skills and detailed knowledge of horse care with the love of riding. Several of Bethany's riders are current members, and some of the staff members are Pony Club instructors.

"I guess you could say Pony Club is like a feeder system to the college. We just pick up where they leave off. We offer veterinarian classes to go along with our basic training and care classes. We look at the complete package," Fischer said.

And at the end of it all, she says it's all about love.

"Horses truly become members of your family. You fall in love with them when you ride and take care of them," Fischer added.

For information on Peace Point's activities and classes, call the center's office at (304) 829-4800.