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# Pony Club's Parade of Disciplines

*Learning A Variety Of Horse Sports Makes Better Riders*

**By Dawn Bellinger**

I read an article recently that said that American teens today don't want to play Junior Varsity. They only want to be Varsity athletes. In horse sports, each discipline has its own JV and Varsity and a rider (and horse) can play JV or Varsity in one but not even make the team in another. An example might be a Hunt Seat Equitation rider who shows at the "A" level but can't leave the arena to ride cross-country in eventing. Or, a Grand-Prix dressage rider (and horse) who can't jump a 3' oxer.

Children today are asked to play Varsity level sports at an earlier and earlier age. They are specializing in one sport before they've even experienced a full range of sports to create an informed preference. They are getting injured at higher rates and they are experiencing burn-out before they even get to college. In horse sports, this is happening too, with barns

and coaches specializing and not exposing their students to a full range of disciplines.

There are two benefits to "playing JV" in a variety of disciplines. First, riders can make an informed decision about which discipline they like best. And second, each discipline teaches a rider different skills which complement the other disciplines.

Pony Club encourages its members to "play JV" in as many different disciplines as possible. It offers competition in nine different disciplines of horse sports: Dressage, Show Jumping, Eventing, Mounted Games, Tetrathlon, Polocrosse, Horse Management, Hunt Seat Equitation, and Western. While Pony Club doesn't offer competition or certifications in some additional disciplines, it believes that there is value in learning others and thus teaches these as well: Distance Riding, Driving, Foxhunting, Polo and Vaulting.

So, what can one discipline teach a rider (and horse) that helps in another discipline? Let's look at an overview of each discipline that Pony Club teaches and evaluate the skills that carry over.

**Dressage** – The French term for "training," Dressage is frequently explained as ballet on horseback. The rider's goal is to control every muscle in the horse while making his or her effort invisible. Competitions involve extremely precise movements that display the

horse's gaits, impulsion and submission as well as the rider's position and correct and effective use of aids. Dressage is a foundation for almost any other discipline.



**Show Jumping** – If Dressage is ballet on horseback, Show Jumping is simply Dressage with jumps in the way. Unlike Hunt Seat, Show Jumping

tests involve sharp turns, are not judged on the horse's technique or rider position, and the fastest finish wins. The best show jumpers are like cats, extremely light on their feet, flexible and athletic. How else can an animal that weighs over a ton leap over an obstacle taller and wider than itself without bringing the whole jump down in a giant heap?



**Western** – Western Riding evolved from the ranching and working horse traditions of the cowboys in the American west. Long hours in the saddle produced well-

broke horses able to perform quick movements with minute cues from their riders and navigate various terrain and obstacles with a careful ease. The disciplines of Western Riding, Trail, and Reining are taught in Pony Club with emphasis on good horse management skills. The skills learned through the Western discipline are foundational for every other discipline.

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**Eventing** – This discipline is referred to as the triathlon of horse sports as it combines dressage, show jumping and cross-country. Historically an endurance and suitability test

for the cavalry, the discipline originally contained two additional parts: roads & tracks and steeplechasing. Today, competitions begin with a dressage test which displays the precision of the horse and rider, then moves to cross-country (a timed test over natural fences and terrain) which displays the endurance of the pair, and finally finishes with stadium jumping, proving that they can return to the arena and execute jumps with precision and athleticism. Eventing skills easily translate to the hunt field.



**Mounted Games** – Let’s face it, games are fun at any level! We’ve all heard of the benefits of learning through play. Mounted Games were originally the idea of His

Royal Highness, Prince Philip, as a way to encourage enthusiasm, participation, and training in younger riders without the need for expensive ponies. A natural draw to all levels of riding abilities, Games provide a fun sport that teaches the basic natural aids, physical coordination, self-confidence, and teamwork skills. Competitions are comprised of many

relay-style races with teams made up of two to five riders of the same skill level. The skills learned in Games easily translates to every other riding discipline.



**Tetrathlon** – Combining riding, running, swimming and shooting, Tetrathlon is the perfect training for modern Pentathlon which adds fencing as the fifth discipline.

Competitors in Tetrathlon must be in excellent physical condition themselves as well as display their riding ability in a test that combines natural elements and terrain with traditional stadium jumps. The skills and physical discipline needed for Tetrathlon easily translate to every other horse sport.



**Horse Management** – Horse Management teaches responsibility and independence, and encompasses all things in horse care: health,

maintenance, nutrition, and handling. The ultimate goal is to create a safe, knowledgeable, well-rounded horse person. It has helped shape the core values of Pony Club. At every Pony Club competition, riders compete in both the riding portion of competition as well as Horse Management. Ultimately, every rider needs to be able to take good care of their mount! Ask any top rider in any discipline and you will hear them extol the virtues of Pony Club Horse Management training.



**Polocrosse** – Like Mounted Games, Polocrosse is a team sport and is a game, basically lacrosse on horseback. Developed in Australia in the late 1930’s, the game consists

of four periods called chukkas, each six to eight minutes long. Polocrosse develops strong self-confidence in riding ability while improving hand-eye coordination. One can understand why boys would be naturally attracted to Polocrosse, Tetrathlon and Mounted Games.



**Hunt Seat Equitation** – This discipline is very similar to the Stadium Jumping portion of Eventing except that the rider is judged on position and the horse is judged on rhythm,

cadence and form. During competition, a rider who makes the course look smooth and easy, with little to no mistakes, will receive a higher score than one who does not. Like Dressage, this discipline requires the rider to control every muscle in the horse while making his or her effort invisible.

In Pony Club, we have a tagline, “Where It All Begins.” We believe in cross-discipline training and that JV level competition is valuable. We want to develop well-rounded horsemen and women with a strong foundation who can then go on to specialize.

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