

## Students Learn Horse Training Skills

**A new Equine Behavior Modification course gives students practical, hands-on experience.**

11-03-2007

Shanna Lee helps a young horse at Mississippi State University become accustomed to a lead rope during a training session on Oct. 17. (Photo by Linda Breazeale/MSU Agricultural Communications)

No matter how much they thought they knew, the two-and four-legged students in Peter Ryan's new "special topic" class at Mississippi State University are learning a lot.

The class, Equine Behavior Modification, is giving 15 students the opportunity to learn how to break horses without breaking themselves.

"The students are practicing the quiet approach to breaking a horse," Ryan says. "This isn't like the movies where a person jumps on a horse and hangs on until it quits bucking. They slowly help the horses progress from simple handling with a halter, to blankets, saddles, weight and bridles."

The new class was born out of necessity after 66 untamed horses were donated to the university. Additional horses from MSU are included in the training. Eventually, the university will sell the horses to support equine research.

"This is a win-win-win situation. The students gain valuable experience, the horses are trained gently, and they will be worth more when it is time to sell them. Buyers will also be able to know what they are getting," Ryan says.

The class is the brainchild of Ryan and Preston Buff, equine specialist with MSU's Extension Service. They enlisted additional instructional assistance from Michael Freely, a local horse trainer.

"My goal for these students is for them to learn how to think and to work on themselves, not just the horses. Mistakes are never the horse's fault," Freely says.

Freely says the students are laying a good educational foundation for each of these horses and their future owners. Along the way, he is trying to pass on his philosophy of horsemanship.

"People need to learn to accept what each horse is--some will be speed-event horses, some will be quiet enough for beginners, some will always need more experienced riders," Freely says. "Nothing is wrong with any of those situations. The problems come when we try to make horses something they are not."

Freely says the key to the students' success is the hands-on opportunity to work with a wide variety of horses. "The students could stand out here and watch me train horses all day, but they wouldn't learn as much," he says.

In addition to time spent with the horses, students are keeping daily journals of the activity and progress made with their assigned horses. They will write a term paper on some aspect of horse management and/or production to complete the course requirements.

Shanna Lee of Poplarville, Miss., is a senior in animal and dairy sciences hoping to pursue a degree in veterinary medicine. She has been breaking horses with her father most of her life.

"The class has reinforced things we've done right, and I've learned new training methods as well," Lee says. "Safety is a big part of this class. For one, we only ride with helmets. I've also learned safer ways to saddle and mount a horse. We have all learned the value of patience."

Lee says she plans to incorporate much of what she has learned when she works with her own horses. "We've been working with young horses, which spook more easily. You have to pay attention all the time and never let your guard down," Lee continued. "Horses have a way of reminding you what you should be doing. They will humble you fast."

This class is similar to a weanling class that MSU has offered during the last two fall semesters. The class uses foals born on the university's farm the previous spring.



"Students not only halter break the weanlings, they also get them accustomed to ropes, water hoses, bathing, blankets, spray bottles and trailer loading," says Molly Nicodemus, assistant professor of animal and dairy sciences.

The public can see some of the horses and students involved in these classes during the university's upcoming horse sale beginning at 1 p.m., Nov. 17. The Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station and MSU's Department of Animal and Dairy Sciences will host the sale at the Mississippi Horse Park.

For more information on the sale, contact the MSU's Animal and Dairy Sciences department at (662) 325-2802.