

Horse Education Day for the Bike Team

By Marge Lewter, Secretary Back Country Horsemen of Virginia

On April 13, 2025, the Eastern Divide Chapter of BCH Virginia gave a presentation about horses to the Blacksburg High School Mountain Bike Team. It was based on the Trails and Tires program developed by the Trail Partners Foundation (trailpartners.org).

At our recent State BCH meeting, Curt Kruger from BCH of North Carolina gave a presentation on sharing the trails and stressed the theme of "Slow and Say Hello" which focuses on communication between trail users. He shared with us the great resources on his Trail Partners Foundation website for planning an informative session with other trail users. Curt inspired our club to take action to reach out to the young trail users in our area.

One of the popular trail systems used heavily by equestrian and bicycles is called the Poverty Creek Trail System in Jefferson National Forest. Located in close proximity to Blacksburg and Virginia Tech, there are over 20 miles of trails maintained primarily by the bike community volunteers. Users include college students, high school teams and many local endurance riders. The parking area is filled with cars and horse trailers on a typical weekend. The vast majority of trail interactions here are uneventful yet once in a while there is evidence that someone just doesn't have a clue about horses. Trail etiquette and knowledge improves everyone's safety and enjoyment.

Our club targeted the high school bike team knowing that they practice and have competitions on these trails that we also use. About 20 students and parents and coaches arrived an hour before their usual Sunday afternoon practice session to learn about horses. We provided snacks and drinks for everyone along with Trail Etiquette brochures our club developed a few years back. (Download a copy from the BCHVA.org.)

We talked about the horse's behavior and instinct and encouraged the kids to ask questions. Member Melissa Downs talked about a horse's hearing and vision and how these senses direct their reactions to bicycles. Another member, Susan Meacham, brought her gentle trail horse, Luna so the kids could practice being up close and personal with a full-size horse. They petted Luna and some kids took a short ride around the parking area.

Our club has done a little bike training with our horses and found that some horses happily accept the bike if it doubles as a treat dispenser! We gave all our high school attendees a bag of horse treats to carry on the trail.

In our discussion we stressed that the goals of enjoyment of the outdoors and getting exercise are shared by mountain bikers and equestrians alike. By reaching out to the team, we were able

to educate them about horses and share our passion for keeping the national forest and its trails open for everyone to use.

In the future we would enjoy doing more of these sessions for the community. It seems that mountain biking's growing popularity guarantees that we will see more bikes in places we least expect them. Being proactive and viewing outdoor sports as a partnership improves communication between trail users and allows us to work together towards common goals.