

## 088 PONY CLUB

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"Riders five to 80 years of age are catered for."

# NO PONY? NO PROBLEM!

Historically, one needed a horse to experience Pony Club. Pony Club Australia is now moving with the times through a new national program to open up the experience to more people through accredited riding centres.



Centre Membership gives young riders like Charlotte the opportunity to access the many benefits of Pony Club - even without a horse of her own.

Growing up, all I wanted to do was learn to ride horses. From the age of seven until 13 I was fortunate enough to head off to a local riding school once a week and spend time in the saddle. At 13 my family moved to acreage and I was generously given an ex-riding school pony.

The next step was to fund a float so I could get to Pony Club, which to me was the holy grail. We hired a float in conjunction with neighbours, and by 15 I was proudly polishing my boots for the first Sunday of every month - it had only taken me eight years to get there!

What if Pony Club had been an option when I was seven? Considering I was taking home riding school bridles between lessons to pull apart and clean, it's safe to say I would have been over the moon. Fast-forward to 2020, and today's seven-year-old horse-mad kids - and adults - starting out at riding centres will soon have this opportunity.

Pony Club Australia is in the process of rolling out a great new initiative: PCA Centre Membership. In short, it means Accredited Centres can offer Centre Member riders a Pony Club experience and access to PCA's rider skills and horse care development system. No pony? No problem!

Dr Kirrilly Thompson is the Participation Manager for the Pony Club Australia Centre Membership program. She explains that PCA saw a need for people to be able to access the benefits of the Pony Club system without necessarily owning their own horse. "We wanted to make sure that people in that situation have the same access to learning about rider safety, horse care and welfare that other Pony Club riders have," she explains.

The idea was inspired by Pony Club in the United Kingdom, where "Linked Centres" are common and around 40% of Pony Club members don't own their own horse. "This is a historic moment for Pony Club in Australia," explains Kirrilly. "The UK have had Linked Centres for about 10 years now."

The PCA chair and CEO travelled to the UK to study the Linked Centre program before returning to write a participation grant to Sports Australia via the Move It AUS participation grant program. This grant was successful and the program is now six months into the one-year grant.

"In the past, families might have had a horse. Parents and grandparents might have had horse knowledge, and there was someone to take children to Pony Club or they would ride there themselves," says Kirrilly. "A family might have only had one or two sports - for example, football and horse riding."

Times have changed. "Now families are quite different and have a lot of competing activities they want their children to engage with. They might not have the time, the commitment, the knowledge or the resources to have a horse of their own. They may just be happy for someone else to carry the responsibility of horse ownership."

While horse ownership in Australia isn't as difficult and costly as in the UK, population growth and increasing urbanisation have meant that Australia is now becoming more that way inclined. There are now many children living in Australian cities who would love to own a horse but are increasingly removed from the possibility compared to previous generations.



Centre Membership is available for adult riders as well as children.



The Equine Club, based in Cranbourne South, Victoria, has been one of the first accredited centres.

This increasing demand for a program aimed at horseless riders has coupled with PCA's general modernisation. Just last year, their 80-year-old syllabus was revamped in line with equitation science framework and with input from big names in the industry such as Andrew McLean. The result is a syllabus that is more comprehensive in terms of rider safety, horse behaviour, training and welfare.

Still in its infancy, the program launched late in 2019 aims to have 1000 riders signed up by the end of the grant period. At time of writing, there are 11 centres across four states that have jumped on board, with another 10 already in process. Unfortunately, drought and bushfires have meant that many centres have had to put the idea on hold in the short term. Where trail riding centres might be unable to run due to a loss of local riding trails and land, the program hopes to be able to help them recover by providing an alternative business model in teaching horse riding.

"So far the centres that are really keen are those that have a previous background with Pony Club and know the benefits, those that want to grow their business, and those that want an enhanced offering for their riders."

Centres, once accredited in accordance with

PCA horse welfare, safety, knowledge, and legal obligations, are given great resources - including the PCA syllabus and access to a new stable, booking and payment management app, Hopoti (Finnish for "clippity clop"). The actual nuts and bolts of how the program is implemented by a centre is at their discretion. As Kirrilly explains, centres know their clientele best and know what is practical for them, their horses and the capabilities of the centre.

For some, it might be business as usual with the inclusion of the syllabus and certificate testing days, while others may choose to hold their own monthly rallies or musters like a traditional Pony Club. Some have expressed interest in their clients taking school horses offsite to Pony Club competitions, and this will be possible for those interested, as Centre Members are national level PCA members and therefore covered by insurance whilst undertaking Centre or Pony Club activities. Each centre will have their own strength and speciality.

Although Pony Club traditionally has been aimed at children, being a national level program there is no age limit; riders five to 80 years of age are catered for. PCA is targeting three demographics: children new to riding, adults new to riding, and adults returning to riding after a break. The last group is

often parents, particularly women, whose children have grown up and left home and subsequently they've regained some "me time". Many of these people may have had a horse in the past, and want to test the waters to see whether they are interested in having a horse of their own again. Some might have always dreamt of learning to ride or going to Pony Club. The program is a great solution for those who want to ride seriously without undertaking ownership commitments. It is also the perfect way to make an informed decision about horse ownership. The syllabus contains information that will help any rider make better choices about what horse ownership requires and what kind of horse will be most suitable.

"Pony Club traditionally for 80 years has been available to people who had their own horse. And so whilst there were other ways for people to ride and overcome those barriers without a horse, there wasn't a way for them to work through the Pony Club system. Our certificate and our syllabus have always covered not just riding, but horse health, behaviour, care and management. What we know is when people go through that system, they become good horse owners. They are capable of riding in a safe way, and also owning horses in a way that their welfare is high," says Kirrilly.

"We want to create a cultural shift in Australia where we recognise that you don't have to own a horse to be a good rider, and you don't have to own a horse to have a good relationship with one. A lot of people ride at centres and still build a close relationship with a horse."

Kirrilly explains that in Sweden, most councils have a local riding school and many children grow up there knowing how to ride - much like Aussie children grow up learning how to swim. She believes there is room here for people to pick up horse riding as something they do as sport - and it could actually benefit the wider Australian equestrian community.

"Horse riding doesn't have to be an all-encompassing lifestyle... even though many of us love that! For some it may be an additional skill, and this would lead to a better understanding of our sport throughout the wider community." As Kirrilly explains, a wider public understanding of equestrian sports assists with public perception in terms of the sport's accessibility (i.e. it's not just a sport for the elite) and also perceived welfare issues, as well as greater interest in TV coverage and spectator events.

The program is sure to appeal to children and adults alike, and it will be exciting to follow the uptake of PCA Centre Memberships through riding establishments around Australia. I know that when I was a child, I would have jumped at the chance to attend Pony Club before I had my own horse - and no doubt many of today's horse-mad kids will too!

*If you are interested in becoming a Centre Member rider, or if you have at least one school horse and are interested in becoming an Accredited Centre, please visit contact Kirrilly at [centremember@ponyclubaustralia.com.au](mailto:centremember@ponyclubaustralia.com.au) or visit [www.ponyclubaustralia.com.au/Centres.aspx](http://www.ponyclubaustralia.com.au/Centres.aspx) EQ*