



## THE UNITED STATES PONY CLUBS, INC. PRESS RELEASE

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### **Pony Club Members Gather for Fun Activities, Education, and Leadership Training at the 2024 USPC Convention, Presented by Via Nova Training and Sponsored by Lincoln Memorial University**

**February 29, 2024 (Lexington, KY)** — From its early beginnings for its first annual meeting in New York City, N.Y., in 1954 with its founding members to a festive and fun-filled educational event in a five-star resort in Reno, Nev., 70 years later, The United States Pony Clubs, Inc. (USPC or Pony Club) kicked off its 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year celebration at the 2024 USPC Convention, Presented by Via Nova Training, and Sponsored by Lincoln Memorial University. Nearly 450 Pony Club members, leaders, and volunteers, as well as equine enthusiasts, gathered for the event, held January 24-28, 2024, at the Peppermill Reno Resort and Spa. Attendees enjoyed more than 50 educational workshops and seminars, plus meetings, awards presentations, leadership training, and other Pony Club activities.

“Pony Club’s annual convention was a great way to start the celebration of USPC’s 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year,” said USPC Executive Director Teresa Woods. “It’s the perfect time to reflect on Pony Club’s history of growth and change as we look forward to what the future holds and work together to continuously improve Pony Club education and the member experience. Since 1954, Pony Club has been a leader in teaching horse care and safe horsemanship. Convention brings our organization together to celebrate all that we have achieved and explore new ways to provide Pony Club education and opportunities for generations to come.”

#### **Education and Leadership**

Representatives from 37 Pony Club regions worked together to improve and expand Pony Club programming for current and future members. In addition to an expansive array of leadership training and educational workshops, the event offered a variety of opportunities—from exploring the Anatomy Lab, presented by Banixx Horse & Pet Care with support from Auburn Laboratories Inc., to shopping at the trade fair and silent auction. Workshop topics delivered important horse-health information and insights on equine behavior, rider fitness and sports psychology, plus land conservation, riding in college, helmet safety, and much more. Pony Club members also got advice to prepare for Horse Management at certifications and rallies, including interactive displays in the hands-on Horse Management Room, presented by Kentucky Equine Research, which was a huge hit with attendees of all

ages.

“I always mention Horse Management when I tell people about Pony Club, because it makes the organization so special,” shared Shawna White, USPC Chief Horse Management Judge and director of digital technology for Kentucky Equine Research. “Judges recognize members for how well they care for their mounts, not just their riding abilities. At Convention, Pony Club members, parents, and volunteers visit the Horse Management Room to learn and practice hands-on skills that are fundamental to rallies and certifications.”

The youngest attendees enjoyed horse-related activities and educational fun in the Pony Paddock, sponsored by the Arabian Horse Youth Association and Santa Barbara Polo & Racquet Club. Riding noodle horses as they rocked colorful cowboy hats, the Pony Paddock kids were not hard to spot. Plenty of Pony Club education plus prizes and activities from the Arabian Horse Association kept the kids entertained throughout the weekend.

“We had a fantastic weekend in Pony Paddock with lots of fun visitors and activities,” said Pony Paddock leader Sedate Kohler. “We had friends teach us about Polocrosse, Foxhunting, Polo, and Vaulting, and even practiced on the vaulting barrel. We spent time in the Anatomy Lab and Horse Management Rooms and asked lots of questions. We also played games with Via Nova Training to learn how to build trust and communicate with horses, because they don’t speak English!”

In the Anatomy Lab, vet tech and longtime volunteer Cindy Healy said that the team “had a blast sharing knowledge. We met up with old friends and made many new ones—thank you to all who came and visited us!”

Healy added that this often includes repeat visitors who come daily or even several times a day. “This year, I had one mother-and-daughter duo that came up with fascinating questions every day. It's always a different experience every year,” she said.

The Anatomy Lab team, including head veterinarian Brad Gordon, DVM, is already looking forward to next year, along with Healy. “Every year when we finish up at the convention, we put the lids on the crates, take a deep breath, look at each other, and start planning what new and fun things we can do for next year to make the Anatomy [Lab] even more exciting!” said Healy.

### **Developing the Next Generation**

Friday’s Convention activities welcomed 18 delegates to the 2024 National Youth Congress (NYC) thanks to support from the Western & English Sales Association (WESA), as well as recognizing Pony Club alumni Stacy Anderson, DVM, PhD, and Board of Governors member Bo Varnado for this year’s Academy of Achievement, who serve as mentors for the National Youth Congress (NYC), a program that instills life skills that are cross-disciplinary and provide a foundation for lifelong success.

“The United States Pony Club has a special place in my heart as an organization that had a major impact on the person that I am today,” shared Anderson, who was impressed with the young leaders taking part in the 2024 NYC delegation at the convention. “They were consummate professionals and fully engaged with the fantastic leadership program offered to them by the NYC.”

Joining the Academy of Achievement and working with the NYC brought things full circle for Anderson, who is currently the dean of Lincoln Memorial University College of Veterinary Medicine. “Over 20 years ago, I participated in one of the first NYC events held in Baltimore, Md.,” she recalled. “I remember being awed by the alumni who attended that event. It is surreal that now I have been inducted into the Academy of Achievement for achievements in my life that were possible because of what I learned as a Pony Club member.”

Bo Varnado, a longtime USPC volunteer with a background in education and marketing, echoed similar thoughts. “I was a member of USPC in my youth and learned so much about organization, planning, safety, horsemanship, teamwork, and friendship, too,” she said. “The transferrable skills helped and guided me throughout all aspects of my life. I circled back around to become involved with our organization again when my children became riders, and I have stayed involved ever since. Attending and participating in the National Youth Congress was nothing short of amazing for me.

“The NYC delegates demonstrated leadership, dedication, awareness of salient issues, and creativity in proposing solutions,” continued Varnado. “I left the NYC experience feeling energized and hopeful for the future. Being honored as an inductee in the Academy of Achievement, in addition to working with the NYC delegates, was icing on the cake. I feel that the NYC/AA program is one of the gems of our USPC offerings.”

The USPC Research Project Fair, presented by Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation with support from Kentucky Equine Research, continued to grow in popularity with 43 participants presenting 35 total projects, both in person and virtually.

“The ability to offer in-person and virtual options for the Research Project Fair has allowed this opportunity to reach many more members and connect them to Pony Club at the national level,” shared Yvette R. Seger, PhD. “In my 10 years organizing the Research Project Fair, we’ve hosted participants from approximately 70 percent of USPC’s regions. Thanks to the sponsors, volunteers, and expert judges who make the Research Project Fair happen.”

Seger notes that it is an incredibly valuable opportunity for Pony Club members to interact with individuals in a range of fields, including veterinarians, equine professionals, scientists, medical professionals, educators, and more. “This is something that is particularly important for sparking interest in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields,” she said.

Pony Club leaders enjoyed a day of seminars and networking sessions to provide improved instruction, organization, and member experiences thanks to support from the Mattingley Leadership Training Fund.

Highlights included updates from USPC’s Regional Administration, Finance, Marketing, Development, and Instruction departments, plus exciting announcements from the Activities department about Festival Championships and two [new programs](#), as well as guest speakers on legal and insurance topics. Small-group breakout sessions and a fun night of trivia brought leaders together to share ideas.

“A key takeaway from this year’s sessions was the vital role of local and regional leaders within the framework of the national organization,” said Rae Birr, USPC Vice President of Regional

Administration. “An overall theme of ‘where do I fit in’ emerged. Networking and friendships developed. If you missed all this fun and education in Reno, plan to come to Traverse City, Michigan, in January 2025 for more opportunities to hear the latest USPC news, happenings, updates, and plenty of fun!”

### **Awards and Achievement**

Many Pony Club awards were presented at the Saturday morning Meeting of the Corporation. Six clubs were recognized for their member dedication and longevity with the United States Pony Clubs with the Club Milestone Award, presented to clubs reaching their 25th or 50th anniversary years.

Four Pony Club members who earned A-level certifications received special recognition for the accomplishment. The A certification is the top level in the USPC certification program and is widely recognized throughout the equine industry as the mark of a highly competent and knowledgeable horse person.

“We are so proud of our new As and the time and commitment to excel and pursue their passion in Pony Club and to achieve the highest certification in USPC,” said Connie Jehlik, USPC Instruction Services Director. “We are excited for their future and continued learning and sharing of their achievements.” The Brookfield Land Conservation Award was presented to Woodbrook Hunt Pony Club and Misty Morning Farm Pony Club Riding Center, while the Flash Teamwork Award went to the late beloved Pony Club mount Sylvester, who was owned by Racine County Pony Club in the Lake Shore Region for many years before his recent passing.

The Saturday Night Banquet was a highlight as attendees celebrated the recipients of the USPC Founders Awards, honoring dedicated longtime volunteers Rae Birr and Eileen Corl Kirby. Olympic-level groom Max Corcoran was the keynote speaker. Corcoran served as president of the United States Eventing Association from 2020 to 2023 and is currently the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) Eventing Elite and High-Performance team facilitator. In her address, Corcoran offered a moving testimonial to life with horses while she shared photos of many of the elite-level horses she worked with, such as Theodore O’Connor, who was ridden by Olympian Karen O’Connor.

### **Thank You to Our Event Sponsors**

Pony Club was pleased to partner with title sponsor Via Nova Training for the 2024 USPC Convention and supporting sponsor Lincoln Memorial University. Additional support for the event was provided by: the American Association of Equine Practitioners; the Arabian Horse Youth Association; Auburn Laboratories, Inc.; Banixx Horse & Pet Care; BLM Wild Horse and Burro Program; Coach Daniel Stewart and his Pressure Proof Coaching Academy; a Contra Costa Pony Club alum; Double Clear Farm; Dover Saddlery; Dressage 4 Kids; Ely and Marcy Payoyo; Featherlite of Reno; Flash, the USPC 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Breyer Model Horse; Gold Country Pony Club; the Grayson-Jockey Club Research Foundation; the Interactive Wild Horse Experience; Jennifer Ludwig; Kentucky Equine Research; Kerrits (the official apparel sponsor of USPC); Lone Tree Farm & Friends; the Mattingley Leadership Training Fund; Meghan Lewis; the Middle California Pony Club Region; Nino Campos Photography; Otterbein University; Ram Tap Horse Park; Santa Barbara Polo & Racquet Club; Santa Ynez Valley Hounds; Shapley’s (the official grooming products sponsor of USPC); Sheila Larsen; a Squamscott Pony Club alum; Sterling Essentials LLC; Triple Crown Nutrition (the official feed sponsor of USPC);

USA Working Equitation; USPC National Examiners; the USPC International Exchanges and Special Opportunities Committee; Western States Horse Expo; Wintec (the official saddle sponsor of USPC); The Horse; the Western & English Sales Association; and Zoetis (the official health and wellness partner of USPC).

### **Save the Date for the 2025 USPC Convention**

Proposals are now being accepted [online](#) for 2025 educational workshops; more information is available [here](#). Pony Club invites all horse lovers to save the date for the 2025 USPC Convention to be held Jan. 22–26, 2025, in Traverse City, Mich., at the Grand Traverse Resort and Spa. More information will be made available throughout the year on [ponyclub.org](http://ponyclub.org).

***About The United States Pony Clubs, Inc.** — The United States Pony Clubs, Inc. (USPC or Pony Club) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization that builds the foundation of teamwork and sportsmanship through riding, mounted sports, and care of horses and ponies, while developing and enhancing leadership, confidence, responsibility, and a sense of community in its youth and adult members. USPC is proud to offer instruction and competitive opportunities in 11 competitive disciplines through hundreds of clubs and centers across the United States. USPC's educational standards continue to be instrumental in curriculum development for schools, universities, equestrian professionals, and organizations across the United States. Many of the nation's top equestrians, including Olympic team members, as well as successful business professionals and leaders in a variety of fields, have roots in Pony Club. For more information, please visit [www.ponyclub.org](http://www.ponyclub.org).*