

## **USPC Embraces Change at Annual Meeting**

*Stacey Reap, Graduate A, Huntingdon Valley Hunt Pony Club*

*Stacey is a regular contributor for The Chronicle of the Horse; The article is reprinted with permission from The Chronicle of the Horse. <http://www.chronofhorse.com>*

For an organization steeped in 55 years of tradition, it can be difficult to loosen the grasp on the past, but members and leaders of United States Pony Club continues to demonstrate that they are willing to make room for innovation, while maintaining the group's core belief system. Exemplifying that mindset were the yellow "Why Change?" stickers sported by attendees of the USPC's Annual Meeting, held Jan. 21-25 in Greenville, S.C., and organized by the Carolina Region.

At last year's meeting, then USPC President Art Kramer explained that 2008 would bring a break from the barrage of new programs introduced in the few years prior and that the focus would turn to greasing the wheels of the organization to help assimilate those new features. These new programs have met with ever increasing success, but in the interim organizers haven't snapped open their lounge chairs, cracked open a frosty beverage and taken a break.

"USPC as it's currently structured is not sustainable, and that's not easy for me to say," explained Executive Director Peggy Entekin at the Meeting of the Corporation Saturday morning, alluding to the many societal, technological, land use and economic issues at play.

Faced with a steady decline in traditional membership of approximately 2 percent annually since 2000 and 4.3 percent last year, the latter likely exacerbated by the current economic climate, USPC had embarked on a five-year strategic plan initiative. They wanted to identify the organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in an effort to identify ways to reverse that trend and improve their programs.

Their research unearthed challenges to USPC's current modus operandi in five categories: peer-to-peer contact, volunteerism, member contact with horses, communication and horse management. Since December, members, parents, and leaders and the local, regional and national level have all been repeatedly solicited for their input on these issues and others to help shape the future of Pony Club.

Visit [www.ponyclub.org](http://www.ponyclub.org) and check in "National Updates" from the "Publications" link to find three special edition messages chock full of questions awaiting feedback on all aspects of USPC. The first round of answers submitted has already been compiled and is posted under "What's New" on their homepage.

While calling for this input, USPC has also formed "Bridge Group" committees of individuals from both within and outside of the organization to study the areas of: Culture, Product/Brand, Structure, Educational Model, Volunteers and Funding. With the World

Equestrian Games slated to bring hordes of eager horse people and their kids literally to the front door of USPC headquarters at the Kentucky Horse Park next year, they want to put their best face forward and ensure they're offering a program that's suitable, appealing and beneficial to today's youth while maintaining the group's overall standards and ideals.

"USPC has a proud history of tradition. We don't do growth for growth's sake. We grow so that we can sustain what we have," explained Pat Maykuth, Strategic Planning Project Manager, during the Meeting of the Corporation.

Maykuth touched on many of the topics being considered regarding options for the future direction of USPC, such as: iPC—an online version of Pony Club; opening up to other disciplines, including Western; finding a way to make the program work for "part-time" members, kids who have limited access to the barn; and even a name change to something that more accurately reflects the group's membership.

"We need to stop the loss of our critical members, ages 10 to 14 years. We need to remove obstacles to membership. Our average member is only in Pony Club for 2 to 3 years, and that doesn't jibe with our 10-year template for the A program," she said. "What would a 24-month program look like? We have to examine the way we do business, which is currently one-size-fits-all, regardless of how much you do."

### **No Immunity for USPC**

Pony Club as a corporation and the people who comprise it have felt the effects of the economic downturn right along with the rest of the country. A very visible manifestation was the absence of Kramer at the Annual Meeting after he stepped down from the presidency earlier in the month, in order to better address the business concerns facing his company.

As a result, Kramer's second-in-command, Tom Adams, took over the helm a little sooner than expected and showed right off the bat his willingness to relate to the membership with a "text-speak" intro to his comments at Saturday night's banquet.

Having spent the previous evening in the company of delegates from the National Youth Congress, he'd gotten a primer on effective methods of communicating with today's "yng ppl" and had audience members "lol-ing" or dumbfounded, depending upon their text literacy. Despite the short notice, Adams seemed ready to lead, "fo' shizzle."

With a net operating loss of over a quarter million dollars last year and the market value of its investment portfolio down over more than \$1 million last year, USPC has made a

concerted effort to tighten the purse strings while looking for ways to further improve what they offer and how they offer it.

“We’ve decreased overhead and salaries in 2008,” explained Treasurer John Wurzler, who went on to assure that with nearly \$5 million in assets, “We’re still financially strong, but have budgeted very conservatively in 2009.”

“These economic challenges would be even more difficult if we hadn’t been planning ahead for the past six years,” followed Entekin in her report. “We now know our members better than ever before.

“The extension of the Pony Club age limit to 25 has been taken advantage of by more people than we ever anticipated, and these members are playing a vital role as mentors. The specialty ratings are being supported—until 2007, national ratings numbers had been declining and now they’re on the rise. The Pony Club Riding Centers are experiencing continued growth [up 32 percent],” she continued. “But participation in nearly all types of horse showing has decreased in the last half of 2008 and we anticipate that will continue in 2009.”

USPC was not immune from the industry’s overall horse showing trend, with last year’s championships’ participation down, and spreadsheets in the red. This year brings a new championships model that encourages a more geographically manageable zone concept, with the Northwest Region stepping up to host a Pacific Coast Inter-Regional Championships on Aug. 10-16, at Donida Farm in Auburn, Wash., in lieu of the traditional Western Championships.

### **Despite it All, Pony Club Still Works**

“I don’t feel the gloom and doom. We know there are changes in our society and we’ll have to change again, but we are a vibrant organization and enable kids to ride horses and progress,” said Christie Campbell, chairperson of the D-1 to C-2 Program committee. “We need to be fun! We need to operate in a way that works for the kids and works for the parents.”

She also noted, “Yesterday, I heard a lot of ‘Well, my daughter...’ comments. [USPC leadership] isn’t doing things for *their* kids, they doing it *for kids*, and we should keep that in mind too.”

During her workshops, Campbell explained the need to and ways to maintain consistent testing standards from club to club and region to region. USPC just released their revamped Standards of Proficiency for 2009, which provide the basis for the ratings system and have been revised to clarify the progression through the levels. She explained that the specialty ratings, which provide dressage or show jumping specific tracks through the system, may diversify lower at some point to accommodate kids who don’t have the desire or facilities to jump or jump cross-country.

“We have to enforce the standards we have now and continue to look at options for lowering the level of diversification vs. compromising the standard of the traditional rating,” she said, promoting the use of Standards and Ratings clinics to demonstrate the riding skills at the different rating levels so that everyone understands the progression through the system.

Shining examples of Pony Club at its finest are the National Youth Congress and Academy of Achievement programs, now in their 11<sup>th</sup> year. The older, typically upper-level Pony Clubbers selected by their regions to attend this program at the Annual Meeting have an incredible opportunity to work with and learn from the outstanding PC alums honored in the Academy. Each year, the NYC delegates develop an idea they present to the Board of Governors later in the weekend.

As a result of NYC brainstorming, an ad hoc committee was formed at last year’s Annual Meeting to develop a PC internship program to offer internships for youth members to assist in and learn about the organization and management of USPC Championships.

“It pairs interested members, who are not competing, with key volunteers, giving the members the opportunity to experience Championships in a whole new way, gain valuable skills and experiences that will help them professionally, and in Pony Club, and prepare the next generation of PC volunteers,” explained Shawna White, a 2008 NYC delegate and member of the Intern Program Committee.

A successful internship pilot program was held at Eastern Championships this past summer, and plans are underway to establish positions with mentors in all the disciplines, ranging from organizers to stewards. A similar program is envisioned in conjunction with the WEG in 2010.

### **Strengthening Communication**

Last year’s NYC delegates formulated a concept for a National Youth Board of members who would serve liaisons between the youth membership and the BOG. In the intervening year, the fledgling NYB has developed a framework for the group, with guidance and approval from the BOG, and met for the first time in Greenville.

“All the members of the NYB are Pony Clubbers, so we are a resource for the Board of Governors to turn to in order to gain insight on what the youth membership would like to see in Pony Club, and we can also provide feedback on ideas that are coming out of committees and the Board of Governors discussions,” explained NYB chairwoman Meredith Baker, 19 and an H-A from Redland Hunt Pony Club (Md.).

“We will help educate Pony Clubbers about Board of Governors decisions and also act as another contact for them to share questions, concerns or suggestions that they may have for Pony Club on the national level.”

While the NYB will eventually be composed of 20 members representing USPC regions across the country, the current board is composed of the group of last year's NYC members, who developed the concept.

In addition to Baker, who is a sophomore at Mount Holyoke (Mass.) studying Neuroscience and Behavior, board members include: vice chairperson Jessie Barker, Jacob Kennedy, Mark Greene, Giny Knox and Becky Brake.

“[The NYB members] are very much aware of the big picture and looking at things that will make Pony Club a success now and in the future,” said Nancy Ambrosiano, BOG member and USPC communications chairperson. “They are very successful members of the organization and sharp college students. They are a product of their times and have the know how to use the tools of today, yet harken back to the traditions of Pony Club.”