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Amish horse trainer believes in using a firm, gentle touch

By MOLLY MONTAG
Times Herald

WALES TWP.- Apache is the kind of horse that likes to do things his way and at his own pace, his owner said.

Danelle Cottrelli, 19, said that often means dragging his feet when asked to go faster and throwing in a buck or two once he does start moving..

ADVERTISEMENT Of course, that was before this weekend, when Cottrelli and Apache met Eli Slabaugh, 31, of Brown City. Slabaugh, an Amish horse trainer, was giving a two-day clinic for horses and riders at Forever Free Inc. in Wales Township.

Cottrelli volunteers for the farm's therapeutic riding program for people with disabilities. She thought Slabaugh could use his brand of natural horsemanship to help Apache kick bad habits.

Slabaugh learned to train horses as a teenager while growing up on a 100-acre farm near Canton, Ohio. The family owned horses used for pulling carts and plows, as well as riding ponies.

He hoped people at the clinic learned to be firm, but not harsh, with their animals. Horses may try to defend themselves against aggressive tactics, he said, but respond better when approached in a calmer, more relaxed manner.

"Try to work with the horses the easy way - not to be too harsh with them," Slabaugh said.

Slabaugh worked with Apache in a small pen dragging a pole with a plastic bag attached near the horse's feet. He also ran the bag over the horse's saddle, checking if he was relaxed. The bag's crackling noise can scare skittish horses.

He made the horse jog and canter in circles before riding him in a larger pen, where he practiced trotting and cantering on command. Apache still tried to get lazy and tried to go back to his pen, but Slabaugh remained firm and kept the horse on track.

Cottrelli hopped on afterward and was pleased with the results. Apache was much more responsive, she said, and cantered without the excessive kicking he normally requires.

[Zoom Photo](#)



FOR MORE INFO

FOREVER FREE, INC.

- For more information about the Amish horse training clinic and other upcoming clinics at Forever Free Inc., call (810) 367-7177 or visit www.freewebs.com/foreverfreeinc.

[Zoom Photo](#)



At top, Apache jerks his head away from Slabaugh, who dangles a plastic bag at the end of a training pole.

[Zoom Photo](#)



"Usually it's really hard to get him to do stuff," she said.

Slabaugh started training horses as a teen. People started asking him to train their horses about nine years ago. Slabaugh said he often works with young horses or older ones that have developed bad habits, such as bucking or other behavior.

"We had to train our own horse, and it just kind of came naturally," he said.

Forever Free owner Tracy Detz asked Slabaugh to give a clinic because she likes his calm approach to training horses. "(He) just goes about it in a calmer manner and speaking the horse's language," she said.

Saturday's clinic was his first, Slabaugh said, but he hopes to do more. "It was fun," he said. "It was nice to meet the people."

Contact Molly Montag at (810) 989-6275 or mmontag@gannett.com.

RIDING TALL: Danelle Cottrelli, 19, of Capac rides Apache past Amish horse trainer Eli Slabaugh of Brown City on Saturday during a horsemanship clinic at Forever Free Inc. in Wales Township.

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