

SPA TREATMENT

Horses stay in prime physical condition courtesy of high-tech facility near Sanger

4/23/2009

Matt James

Fresno Bee columnist

SANGER -- If Lance Armstrong were a horse, this is where he would train.

You know the footage of Armstrong on some prototype bike in some space-age lab somewhere, probes poking out of his head, monitors stuck to his chest?

Well, that's what this is. Except that it's for animals with horse-size hearts. OK, so maybe it's for Armstrong, too.

It's called the Annadale Equine Center, a facility as high-tech as it is remote, five miles east of Sanger up against the foothills.

The 95th annual Clovis Rodeo starts today, and even though cowboys and cowgirls always are referring to the animals as athletes, it's hard to think of them that way. Horses are big and fast. Bulls are big and mean. Baby cows are cute and helpless.

(Yes, they're called calves. "Baby cows" just makes them sound even more cute and helpless.)

You don't think of animals as needing physical fitness. They just are. Nature has ordained them fit. About the only animals who seem to get fat are dogs and cats, and that's because they live like we do. On couches.

And if horses did get fitness training, you'd think it would be the way elementary school kids used to stay in shape, back before video games. Turn them loose outside and go round them up at dinner.

But apparently a horse can get sophisticated fitness training, as evidenced by the 40 or so Clovis Rodeo participant horses that are being kept here this week at the equine center, opened less than two years ago by a Chowchilla native and former Fresno State student, Bert McGill. He's also a semiretired professional team roper, a highly successful one.

And by that, I mean he still has all his fingers.

You might remember McGill's younger brother, Clint, played baseball at Fresno City, then Texas Tech, then briefly in the minors for the Astros. OK, you might not remember that.

McGill's center specializes in aqua therapy, which in the olden days meant you walked your horse around in a shallow pond. Now you take your horse to McGill and his "AquaPacer," a contraption that weighs 3,800 pounds and costs more than my parents' house. It builds strength and helps injured horses recover quicker.

In short, it's a treadmill enclosed by Plexiglas that can be filled with up to 800 gallons of water while the horse is walking. You've never seen anything quite like it: green and red buttons, adjustable speeds, the animal calm and striding right through it. You can adjust the temperature of the water. It's an equine sauna and whirlpool.

Let's be honest. This place is a day spa for horses. A hay bed and breakfast. These animals have it good.

A well-known barrel racer, Rachael Myllymaki, is keeping two of her horses there this week. Several of the race horses people scream for at Santa Anita and Los Alamitos built their muscles up right outside Sanger.

"I haven't used the swimmer much yet, but I've seen the results of the girls who have," Myllymaki says.

"If everyone else shows up in a Ferrari and I'm driving a Fiat, that's a problem."

This is a 32-year-old woman who knows. You could buy a Myllymaki barrel racing instructional video online right now. Twenty years ago, at age 11, she was one of the youngest to ever ride in the National Finals Rodeo, and has qualified six times since. Her ride is not so much a Fiat, but a gray mare named "Wink," an 11-year-old horse she compares to Britney Spears because, "She's talented, but sometimes her personality is a little much." Before a barrel race in Utah, Wink reared up, jerked the reins right out of Myllymaki's hand and took off running toward a highway. She went a mile before she decided she'd scared everyone enough and came back. No report as to whether the horse just snickered, or actually grinned and blinked one eye.

Myllymaki and Wink will be competing when the barrel racing starts this morning at the rodeo grounds, and if you've ever wondered what the rodeo life is like, listen to the plan. Myllymaki wants to qualify high enough this morning that she doesn't race again in the Clovis Rodeo until Sunday. That will free her up to race Friday night at the Lakeside Rodeo and Saturday morning at the Springville Roundup.

In case you were wondering, Springville is near Porterville, and Lakeside is near San Diego; a little 330-mile all-night road trip she hopes to do twice this weekend. In the scheme of things, that's nothing for a pro rodeo competitor. Most have done six or seven states in five days, bought last-second plane tickets, rented charter planes with a few other cowboys, paid two drivers to run two different rigs carrying two different horses, the whole thing's financing resting on a few seconds of snorting horse and flying dirt.

"We're probably the biggest gamblers there are," Myllymaki says.

Says her boyfriend, Pat Boyle, a team roper: "If we took all this to an investor, he'd laugh at us."

After this weekend, you should all take some time off. I know a hot tub with plenty of room. Pay no attention to the horse hair.

The columnist can be reached at mjames@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6217. Read his blog at www.fresnobeehive.com/sportsbuzz/