

*By Sarah Cavacini scavacini@palatkadailynews.com July 20, 2021
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A 14-year-old Palatka boy stood without fear in the center of a round pen at Rodeheaver Boys Ranch as a 1,300-pound horse galloped around him.

Jonathan Hall, one of three boys in the Junior Wrangler Vocational Program, admitted his thoroughbred horse, Trooper, intimidated him two months ago. But now, Hall has no problem training or being in the same stall as the 20-year-old animal.

“When I first gave him Trooper ... (Hall) looked at me like, ‘You’ve got to be kidding,’” Farm Director Randy Moore said.

But by June, Hall became the program’s first Junior Wrangler of the Month.

Moore leads the Junior Wranglers and said the boys who are accepted into the program will know everything about equines by the time they are finished. The boys will stay junior wranglers until they are ready to graduate high school and leave the ranch at 18.

“If you can handle a 1,200-pound animal or, in some cases, a 2,000-pound animal, you can do just about anything,” Moore said.

The vocational program is one of numerous programs offered to the boys who stay at Rodeheaver, an 800-acre ranch on State Road 19 just south of Palatka that provides a home for at-risk boys.

As a Junior Wrangler, Moore said the boys will learn how to doctor, train, care for and ride a horse. After they continue the program,

participants will have the skills and certifications to get jobs anywhere within the equine community.

“It’s a big responsibility,” he said.

The ranch has 11 horses and each student will be assigned to their horse for their entire time in the program.

Hall said he takes Trooper out every morning and afternoon.

“And when school starts back up, I still have to come in the morning,” the Palatka High School student said.

Hall led Trooper into the round pen Friday and guided the animal with a whip that never touched the animal. Moore said the boys put the whip behind the horse to guide the animal in the direction it should go without hurting them.

“I don’t even have to use the whip anymore with Trooper,” Hall said.

He guided Trooper in a circle, pointing the purple whip in the direction he should move. The horse galloped – kicking up sand with his mane blowing in his breeze – and flew circles around Hall.

But the horse came to a stop at Hall’s command and stayed by his side, following him “like a dog, step for step,” as Moore taught the boys.

The farm director said the program extends beyond a classroom setting because he uses the time with his students to impart wisdom, talk to them and build character. Moore said he wants the boys to learn two things: they are loved and they are valued.

“I’m trying to build an integrity in these boys (so) that they understand they have responsibility, they understand that they are valuable, they

understand they have skills they can use (and) that if they can't do anything else right, they can do this right," he said.

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