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#IRL IN REAL LIFE



★ One of the FEW

FIND OUT WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A BOY RIDER AMONG A SEA OF HORSE GIRLS.

BY CHARLES TONAGEL / PHOTOS BY AMANDA TONAGEL

My name is Charlie Tonagel, and I'm 15 years old. I live in Indiana just over an hour's drive from Chicago, Ill. One of my favorite equine memories as a young child is being pulled around in a pony-drawn cart. Trigger and Honey were the first two ponies that sparked my interest in horses. Since then, competing and riding horses has developed my interest in them, shaped my character, and helped me build friendships.



Charlie competes in showmanship and western pleasure with a Paint Horse named Frank.

My grandparents adopted Honey from the local animal shelter. I specifically remember my grandma or grandpa leading Honey while she pulled a cart with my siblings, cousins, and me in it. As I got older, I would ride Honey by myself and brag to my siblings that they couldn't trot. My competitive spirit was sparked by this new interest, which led to showing.

Great Mentors

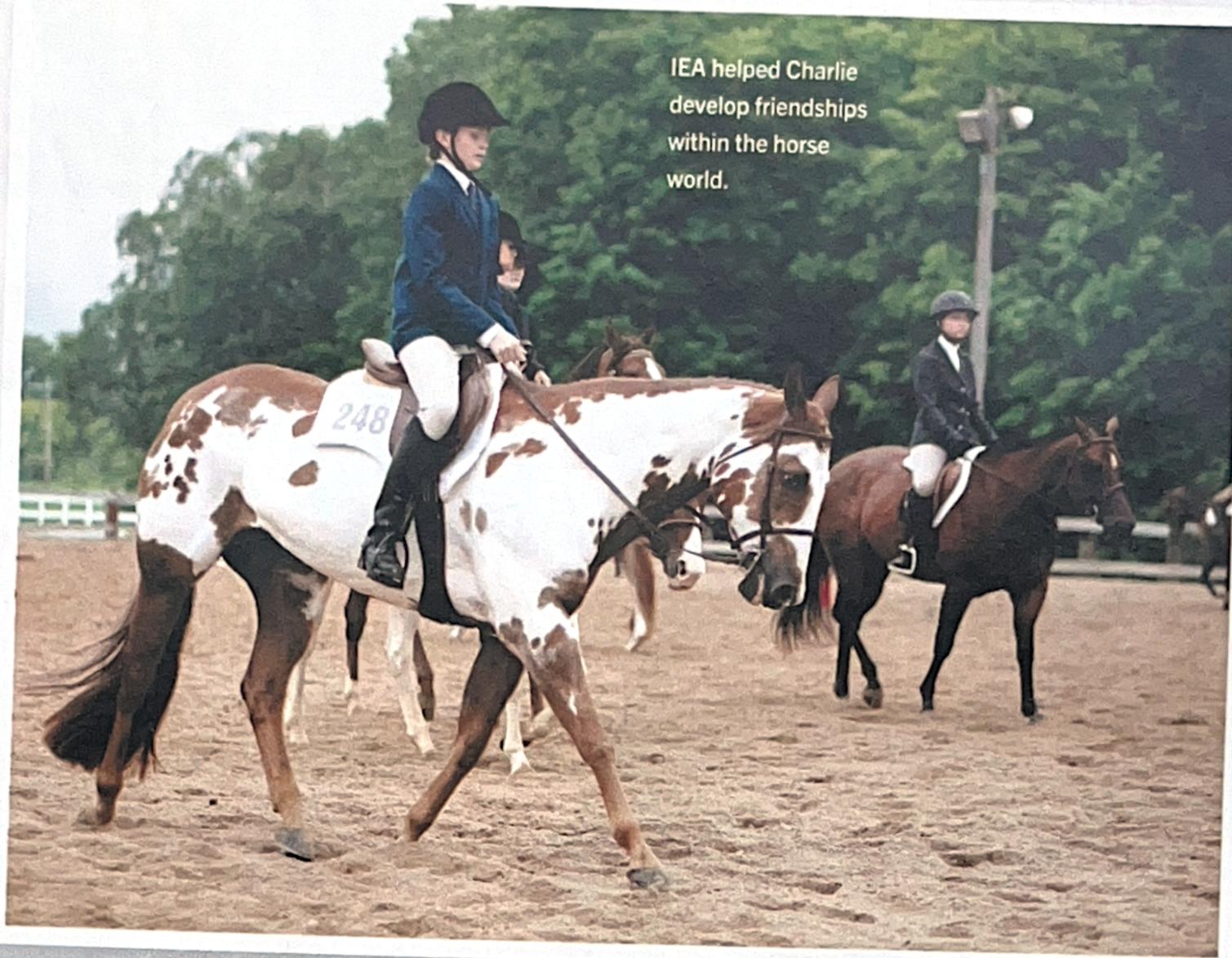
When I was in third grade, I joined our local La Porte County 4-H Horse and Pony Club. I had a great opportunity with a high schooler named Olivia to ride her Shetland Pony, Alfie. Alfie was a handful, but he was a great first introduction into showing. Olivia was an excellent mentor who showed me the work needed to be a great showman.

Another person who was a strong influence in my life and as a showman was my grandpa, Bob Sensow. He was involved in La Porte County Horse and Pony for many years. He helped my uncle, my aunt, and my mom be successful in 4-H. He was so "barn smart." He knew everything from putting a harness on a horse to building the barn itself. I loved that he came to watch me show all the time, and I will never forget how proud he was because of his huge smile.

One of the Only Boys

La Porte County Horse and Pony had a few guys in it when I joined. Most of the guys my age competed in contesting (similar to mounted games), which was not my preferred discipline.

I didn't notice the lack of guys when I was younger, but when I joined an Interscholastic Equestrian



IEA helped Charlie develop friendships within the horse world.

Association (IEA) team, it was quite obvious. There were only two guys on my IEA team, me and a boy named Jack. Jack was older and a great role model who I could look up to as a young rider.

I would go to shows and be one of the few guys in my classes. This was surprising, because I think the sport is quite a masculine thing to do because of the connection to cowboys in ranching and farming. I look up to role models like my Grandpa Sensow and President Teddy Roosevelt, who were important people who also rode horses.

IEA provided fun experiences that were beneficial to my showing career. I loved getting up early and traveling to shows. Riding new horses every time was fun, but at the same time, also nerve-wracking. Getting a mount drawn out of a hat was a little scary. It also was very challenging to have to learn how to ride a new horse 10 minutes before the class. IEA also provided social time in between classes that created friendships and team bonding.

Paint Horse Pal

I've never had a guy friend to ride with, but for the last two years, I've had Frank, the horse I'm currently riding. Frank is an American Paint Horse gelding that is the same age as me. We enjoy showing in showmanship and western pleasure, and the smiles after a class prove that.

Riding and showing have been rewarding, but I've had my struggles. For example, Frank was sick for about a year, and it was hard to be enthusiastic when all I could do was hand-walk him. Another struggle has been not being able to ride with other guys. Having a guy friend to ride with has never been an option. However, even with these struggles, I've still enjoyed showing and riding.

Throughout these amazing years of 4-H, open horse shows, and IEA competitions, I've learned to love riding horses and have grown as an individual. These experiences have taught me to always have fun, work hard and develop friendships. *