

Melcher saddles up as equine ambassador

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Monday, July 11, 2016 10:02 am

JEFFERSON — Horse-riding always has been a source of great comfort to Melissa Melcher, who began riding at horse camp when she was very young.

Melcher's mother passed away when her daughter was just 8. The loss was tough on Melcher but, fortunately, she found a friend and mentor in Jodi Tweeden, who taught her about horses and helped get her into showing.

It's Jodi's horse that Melcher rode as she took the crown on Saturday night to become Jefferson County's 2016-17 equine ambassador. Melcher was one of two candidates for the position, joining Kathryn Warner of Jefferson.

"Horses kind of made me the person I am today," said Melcher, who will represent the Jefferson County Horse and Pony Project this summer and into the fall at various fairs, at the State Horse Expo, the state 4-H Gymkhana, and other events.

"By working with horses, I've learned you get what you put into an effort," she added. "I've learned responsibility, and what it means to have another living thing relying on you."

Melcher, 17, lives in Watertown and attends Lakeside Lutheran High School in Lake Mills. She grew up on the family farm on the edge of Ixonia but did not have horses there. Instead, she always has ridden Tweeden's horses.

A member of the Concord Center Clovers 4-H Club, Melcher ultimately hopes to find a career that



EQUINE REP NAMED

EQUINE REP NAMED — Melissa Melcher of Watertown was named the Jefferson County Equine Ambassador Saturday night during the 2016 Jefferson County Fair. She has been riding since she was eight years old. A Lakeside Lutheran High School student, she grew up on the family farm on the edge of the Town of Ixonia but did not have horses there. Her hope is to find a career allowing her to work with animals. Shown above is Melcher and her main riding horse "J.J." —

will allow her to work with animals. Last year, she took a step toward that goal when she got her “first real job” working with horses at the Long View Grange horse farm in Watertown.

Daily Union photo by Pam Chickering Wilson.

She began weekly riding lessons at the age of 8, and this marked Melcher’s sixth year showing horses at the Jefferson County Fair.

“I always looked up to the equine ambassadors in past years, and I decided to run this year to help the project get back to where it was when I was younger,” Melcher said. “It was amazing.”

She said that there have been some challenges for the horse and pony project in the past year, with the biggest problem being a decline in the number of participants.

That made her want to take on a bigger role in leadership of the project. She recently joined the Horse and Pony Project Committee and will have a larger role as equine ambassador for Jefferson County over the next year.

“Since I don’t own my own horse, I don’t have the typical experience many other members of the project do,” Melcher said.

She said she’d like to serve as an example for other youth who are interested in horses, riding and showing but who do not have animals of their own, such as those participating in the 4-H “Horseless Horse” project.

That project matches youngsters who don’t have their own horse or don’t have one that’s suitable for showing with a buddy who has a horse. They share duties in caring for and working with the animal. The owner receives help with barn and other chores, while the Horseless Horse member receives an invaluable experience in terms of education and personal experience with an animal.

“I want others to know that just because they don’t own their own horse, that doesn’t mean they can’t take an active part in the horse and pony project,” Melcher said.

Melcher said her family has been very supportive of her interest. Her dad Thomas, an electrician, always has been there for her, to drive her around or get her to shows, even though he does not have a background in horses himself, and her brother, Carter, 14, has accompanied her to many a lesson, voluntarily helping with cleaning stalls and other chores.

The competition

The Equine Ambassador competition covers much more than just fair week. It’s actually a months-long commitment. Competitors turn in their initial applications in February. They then give speeches in March in front of project officials. In May, they each performed a particular showmanship pattern at the 4-H open show.

In June, contestants go through personal interviews and also take a test on many aspects of horses and horsemanship.

Finally, on the Saturday night of the Jefferson County Fair, they performed their last event during the fair horse show.

Each contestant had to create and perform their own (Western-style) horsemanship pattern.

This exercise takes the horse through all of the basic paces, moving at different speeds and showing off what the animal can do.

Melcher said her horse picked up the wrong lead at first, but he switched back right away and otherwise performed beautifully.

“My favorite part of the equine ambassador competition was the showmanship and equitation, which were the least stress-inducing,” Melcher said.

“And the interview was fun,” she said. “We got to talk about what we’re involved in outside of horses, and why we wanted to serve as ambassador.

“The test was actually really difficult,” Melcher noted. “For example, it had a lot of questions about cowboy and ranch duties, which was very interesting but which I didn’t have a lot of background with.”

The test also covered horse health, riding and structure, and some questions about driving horses.

Even though she really has not worked in that area, Melcher said she has gained some familiarity with driving through the horse farm she works at in Watertown, owned by Bob and Donna Long.

“I’ve been there a year since I got my driver’s license,” Melcher said. “It was really kind of chance how I hooked up with them. He was a Watertown orthodontist, and he was filling in at the office I go to when I happened to be there.”

Melcher visited the Long farm to see how things worked there, met the farm’s horse trainer, and before too long she was an employee. At Long View Grange, Melcher helps clean paddocks, feeds the horses, helps to exercise them and takes care of the foals who are born on site, getting them used to humans.

“That’s the best part of my job,” she said. “They are really cute.”

Melcher said that the horse farm just is the perfect employment for her.

“It makes going to work actually fun,” she said. “I was actually able to take one of their old driving horses who had been imported from Norway and worked with him, taking him from a driving horse to a great little Western Pleasure horse.”

That was Uno, whom she rode at the recent 4-H open show, along with her regular horse, Tweeden's Rugged Rendition, whose nickname is "J.J."

"This is my fourth year with him," Melcher said. "Prior to him, I showed his mother."

The mare had competed internationally and really knew the ropes, so riding her was not difficult, she said, adding that the horse just automatically did what she was supposed to.

In contrast, riding J.J. has been a great learning experience, Melcher said.

"He has a big heart and gives you his all, but you really have to work for it," she said. "He has a great attitude about coming to shows too — a lot of horses get really cranky when they get into a different environment."

Horse and Pony Project members only are allowed to bring one animal to the Jefferson County Fair, so Melcher brought J.J., competing with him in several categories, including English showmanship grade 10 and up; Western Showmanship grade 10 and up; Hunter Under Saddle (an English pleasure competition) grades 11-13; and Hunt Seat Equitation, grades 10-13.

She also had five entries in photography, and her horse provided a great subject for some of her pictures.

In the fall, Melcher will be a senior at Lakeside Lutheran, and she just is beginning to look at potential colleges or courses of study.

"Wherever I end up, I do want to go into a field that allows me to work with animals," she said.