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Dennis Grundman/Daily

Emerson Kappler, 12, on Sundance, a Western quarter horse, leads Charlotte Kirks, 12, and others through the foliage. Rocking S Ranch offers a variety of rides on horseback including trail and creek rides.

Happy trails

WINCHESTER

Before you put your trust in a horse you need to trust the man in charge of it.

Meet Sundance, an 8-year-old quarter horse from Wyoming. He likes girls, long walks through chest-high deep waters and traveling at a slow pace. He doesn't like being tied up, facing an open area.

Two visitors learned this last bit of information last week when, soon after arriving at the Rocking S Ranch for their first horseback ride, Sundance began jumping on his hind legs while tied to a wooden post, splitting it.

"They all have their idiosyncrasies," ranch owner Bill Schwasta said. "He gets spooked when tied up and there are distractions."

Now meet Schwasta, a 56-year-old former rodeo man from Orange, N.J. He also likes girls — he's got two, Shane, 10, and Hayley, 6, both of whom are loyal employees, too — and riding horses through anything at any pace. Above all else, though, he likes to keep people safe.

As Sundance did his own little dance, forcing Schwasta's right-hand man Glenn Loveless to hammer the wooden post back together, the safety factor in the ranch owner's character made its presence. Schwasta noted how Sundance is Hayley's horse and calmly tied him to a post in front of a barn, where, with nothing but a wall to stare at, he was at peace.

And so were the two first-time horse riders.

"I've never lost a horse, I mean, a rider," Schwasta said, smiling.

About safety, though, the cowboy was dead serious.

"It's not dangerous unless you have a dangerous horse," Shane said, "and we don't have any dangerous horses out here."

Sundance would later be among a group of six horses that went on an anything-but-dangerous trail ride for more than an hour. It was Schwasta's signature creek ride, which takes riders through, among other things, chest-high deep water — for the horse. They love it, he said.

Shane and Hayley do, too, both stating that the creek ride is their favorite among the six at the ranch. For the 20 to 25 horses Schwasta owns, they have maneuvered the hills and waters of the trails on the property and surrounding land since May 2004. There also are lessons and pony pizza parties available to customers.

But during a drought, resulting in rising hay and food prices, or in the



Glenn Loveless, on Silver, enters a creek followed by the rest of the riders, including ranch owner Bill Schwasta, who attends every trail ride that the ranch offers. Rocking S provides rides year-round to people of any level of expertise.



Hayley Schwasta, left, her father and sister, Shane, sit under the sign to the family's ranch in Frederick County.



Schwasta helps Kirks with her stirrups. Rider safety is a priority at the ranch.

winter, business can sometimes be a struggle.

"This doesn't have to be the best-kept secret in Winchester," Schwasta said.

On Glaze Orchard Road in northern Frederick County, the ranch, with a significant amount of acreage that its owner wishes not to reveal, is open year-round, and he has reciprocal agreements with its neighbors to allow riding off the property 75 percent of the year. Right now, during hunting season, is when land is limited.

"It's a small price to pay to stay off



Schwasta, on Trooper, oversees the creek crossing on the creek ride, the signature ride at the ranch and a favorite for both riders and their horses. Though visitors might get their feet wet, they can mostly just sit back and enjoy the ride.

for three months when you can ride another nine," Schwasta said. "I'm not going to bite the hand that feeds me."

Schwasta found his way to tranquil trail riding with neophytes after a rodeo career out West.

He was on the circuit from 1979 to 1982, touring in Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. Schwasta came to Virginia in 1990 and lived in the area for several years raising horses before opening the ranch.

His theory was that the Northern Shenandoah Valley could use another outdoor recreational activity to complement the mix of hiking, biking and

water-related sports that are already prevalent. Horseback riding, Schwasta said, is also a much cheaper alternative to horse ownership, providing the opportunity for horse lovers to scratch that itch of wanting to be close to the animal without assuming all sorts of extra costs.

But in Rocking S's existence a majority of visitors are first-time or infrequent riders, Schwasta said. With an eye gazing toward Northern Virginia for customers, those rookies form the largest pool of potential riders and the best chance for the ranch's

Trails

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popularity to continually grow. "The vast majority are average, everyday citizens who do not ride that much," Schwasta said.

Loveless, the head wrangler, could be considered in that category as little as a year ago. He has lived in the county for 27 years and has had a desire to ride for a lot longer. It took a number of factors coming together at once — time, opportunity and the death of his wife several years ago — to make it happen.

"It's as much as a diversion for me and something I wanted to pursue all my life and never had the opportunity to do so," Loveless said. "And I'm loving it."

He's a calming presence for the apprehensive rider at Rocking S, too. Loveless, with a travel-tired Schwasta busy trying to get horses ready for a ride, tied Sundance to the ill-fated wooden post, which the 1,000-plus pound animal easily took apart.

"They may be bigger," Loveless said of the horses, "but they're not smarter."

Nabeel Ahmed, 28, of Ashburn, and Stephanie Cooper, 27, a student at George Mason University, arrived a short time later. They were students of Schwasta's at one point at Greenway Stables in Aldie, and come to the ranch once or twice a month.

Ahmed said Cooper introduced him to riding seven years ago.

"I always wanted to [ride] as a child," she said, "but your

parents don't always let you do what you want. I met Bill and went from there."

Ahmed took some convincing, Cooper said, but he eventually became enamored with riding. Now, the pair help with saddling the horses and preparing them for rides, with Ahmed in his cowboy boots and cowboy hat.

"Even when you go with a bunch of people," he said, "it's kind of you and the horse. You do your own thing."

Last week, Ahmed was quiet as Loveless, accompanied by Schwasta — he goes on all rides — Cooper and the two first-time riders, led the group on the creek trail. It's designed as an hour ride, but with a few stops to chat along the way, it veers closer to an hour and a half.

Cooper warned beforehand of Schwasta's jokes, and immediately as the horses walked up the road to get to the path, he let them fly.

It's a good tactic, though, as first-time riders, because of Schwasta's resistance to silence, forget they are riding a horse and that they ever had any reason to be afraid. The ride is almost the feeling of gliding, and there are friends to glide with. Before trail rides, Schwasta offers a quick lesson.

The creek ride is unique because, to no surprise, of the creek aspect. Horses go through the chest-high waters, splashing along at a pace as if they were on dry land. The riders may get their shoes wet — particularly in the summer

time, Shane said — but otherwise it's a time to sit back and enjoy walking on water.

The trail also has its ups and downs, as in the terrain. Schwasta provides quick pointers — lean forward when going up, lean back heading down — and the horses take care of the rest. The ride up hill is one of the more exhilarating parts to the experience since the horses kick it into another gear to make it to the top.

The ride is mainly walked. Once riders are comfortable, the pace picks up to a trot, but only if the riders find it not to be too fast.

Schwasta uses quarter horses, which are traditional Western horses known for their even temperament.

"They're just a good all-around horse," he said. "They've got a lot of common sense."

That's not only refreshing to hear as a first-time rider, but also to see. On the creek ride, the horses obeyed all commands given them by rookie riders.

A testament to the operation is that many of the new riders return for more.

"There's a lot of people [who do that]," Shane said. "Usually, pretty soon they have the hang of riding and they are like professionals."

The ranch is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Reservations are required. For more information, call 678-8501 or visit www.therockingsranch.com.

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