

Wild workout



JARROD THOMPSON/Staff photo

Tola McInnis, 5, of Ipswich maneuvers through an obstacle course at Cuvilly Arts and Earth Center Thursday afternoon. Children at the Ipswich school get their exercise doing chores around the farm.

Keeping 'em fit on the farm

BY STEVE LANDWEHR
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Abe, a mostly tan dog of indeterminate age and questionable bloodlines, was yelping his head off at the Cuvilly Arts and Earth Center in Ipswich this week. Behind the school's glass doors, 10 5-year-olds were getting ready to join him in the surprisingly warm March sunshine, and Abe was aquiver with excitement.

As the kids spilled out the door dressed in heavy boots and work gloves, a barnyard chorus greeted them. Geese honked their

way to the fence, and a big black pig snorted his way back and forth in his pen.

The school recently embarked on a program called Fitness on the Farm, a form of recess few other children this age will ever experience. It combines exercise and small-scale animal husbandry, with the kids getting a workout while helping to care for the livestock.

The center is as much a small farm as a kindergarten and preschool, and its founder, Sister Pat Rollinger, believes her charges

Please see **CUVILLY**, Page A2

FROM PAGE ONE

CUVILLY: Keeping kids fit down on the farm in Ipswich

■ Continued from Page A1

should learn about the interconnectedness of all living things at an early age.

Joseph Sirois was about to discover the oldest truth of farming. Stepping gingerly into the corral where the center's two horses were watching warily from afar, Joseph looked around and said, "Oooh ... lots of poop."

But soon he was leading Chique, a 22-year-old mare, out for some grooming. Before he could begin, Rollinger made him clamber over a section of fencing ("piece of cake," he said), crawl through a small cage and jump over three small bales of hay. When he got to Chique, he had to climb onto a platform built to elevate kids to horse height.

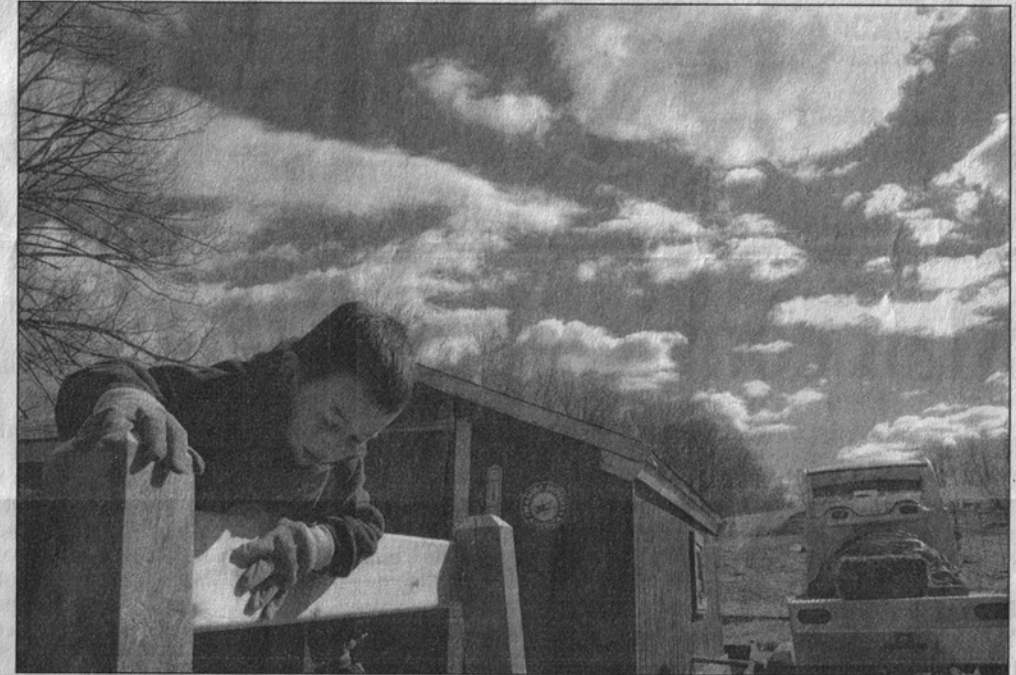
Chique was patient while Joseph ran a curry comb over her side.

"She's got a bit of an attitude," Rollinger said, "but she's pretty good with kids."

Chique's stable mate, Nelson, who hates being separated from his pal, began whinnying in the corral.

"Whoa! That's a loud noise," Joseph said.

Meanwhile, some of Joseph's classmates were carrying small pails of water to fill the larger pails from which the animals drink. To get there, they had to negotiate three tires and a ladder laid out on the ground. Inside the barn, other kids were using miniature rakes to muck out the



JARROD THOMPSON/Staff photo

Joseph Sirois, 5, of Ipswich maneuvers through an obstacle course at Cuvilly Arts and Earth Center Thursday afternoon. The center is keeping kids fit with a new program that incorporates chores and fun challenges.

stalls.

They dumped everything into a wheelbarrow, then three of them manned the handles to roll it out to the compost heap.

When they were done, Rollinger showed them the difference between hay — "This is what they eat," she said, holding some up — and straw — "This is what they sleep on."

As the kids filled the mangers

in the center of the barn, the Nubian goats began kicking up a ruckus in their stall. After herding the kids to safety, Rollinger said, "Now we'll show you how much the goats like what you did for them."

The goats scrambled through the gate as Rollinger opened it and dove right into the fresh hay, nearly as happy as the excited kids.

Kate Dwyer, the center's direc-

tor, looked around the barn and congratulated the children.

"I don't think I've ever seen this place so clean," she said before releasing the kids.

The reward for their hard work? More exercise in the school's playground.

They didn't seem to mind.

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