

Partners in *heating*



This is Payton Green (mentioned in the article), attending her first-ever horse show. As you can see, she won a first! She is being assisted by one of our regular volunteers, Leslie Bennet, and riding our school horse Dooley.

Therapy horses offer a profound testimony to the extraordinary relationship between equines and humans.

BY LILLIAN TEPERA

Few equines have “jobs” with as profound an effect on humans as therapy horses. Helping people with physical rehabilitation, social skills and self-esteem... these are all part of the therapy horse’s job description. But as complex as the outcomes are, the job itself is straightforward. It is, quite simply, to be a horse.

The physicality of riding

Riding is a very physical activity. If you have any doubts about its physicality, try this simple experiment next time you’re on your horse. Close your eyes for a few laps around the arena, and focus on your body as it responds to his movement. You may be surprised by how many of your muscles are involved in fluidly sitting even a quiet walk.

“I’ve been riding for a year now,” says Tyhme Thompson, a 20-year-old woman who suffered a serious spinal cord injury two years ago in an ATV accident. “I’ve seen a

development and change in my physiotherapy sessions that’s directly related to riding. It’s strengthened my core and spine, and improved my posture. And the horse’s movement helps joint mobility in my hips, knees and spine and that helps maintain bone density.”

Developing a bond

Therapeutic riding offers other benefits as well. Most riders form a connection with their horses that improves their mental state. “Development of a relationship with a horse offers the opportunity for acceptance, nurturing, intimacy, safe touch and physical affection, collaboration, development of a sense of mastery and empowerment,” explains Jan Yorke, PhD, in a study of the therapeutic effects of equine-human bonding.

That list may seem astonishing to someone who has not experienced a relationship with an equine, but will come as no surprise to anyone who rides. And while many

animals have been shown to have a positive impact on human health, Dr. Yorke notes two important differences between bonding with a horse and bonding with a dog or cat: the size of the horse, and the amount of physical contact between horse and rider.

“You can’t sit on your dog and go for a four-hour ride in the mountains,” one of the participants in her study says. Others also mention the importance of physical contact, describing it as a “safe zone” and its effects as “therapeutic”. Riding is unique in the amount of physical contact it offers. When it comes to size, Dr. Yorke notes that “developing a rapport with an animal that weighs 1,000 pounds builds confidence, self-esteem, and effective communication skills such as patience and clarity.”

Overcoming challenges

These benefits are demonstrated many times a day in the therapeutic riding arena as the rider struggles to communicate with the horse by use of rein or leg aids, and voice commands to “whoa” or “walk on!” Frustration is replaced by triumph when the rider pulls the rein and the horse’s head turns in response. For those who struggle to communicate with their fellow humans, discovering their ability to communicate with a horse can be very empowering.

As a 15-year-old with autism, Payton Green has her share of challenges in an environment that can be brutal to anyone who is different – remember high school? But in riding, she has found the opportunity to succeed, and that success involves an animal many times her size.

Payton’s willingness to persevere in communicating clearly with her horse has grown tremendously since she began riding 18 months ago. Where she once shut down if the horse did not react the way she wanted, she is now willing to try again and again, and to communicate more clearly to get the response she wants. Her joy when she succeeds is obvious.

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On the ground, Payton was hesitant to lead her horse for fear of being stepped on or dragged, but she has learned to lead him around the arena before mounting up for her lesson, and has even guided him through an obstacle course using nothing but a carrot (a fun class at a local

schooling show). Sometimes she still looks astonished at the horse's willingness to obey her.

Breaking communication barriers

When horse and rider struggle to communicate effectively, frustration is often the result. For Justin Martin, a ten-year-old autistic boy who is prone to anger when he does not get his own way, riding is very therapeutic. "It's helping him learn not to judge others, to voice his opinions nicely, and not to take his frustrations out on his horse," his mother Marcia explains. "He is learning to be responsible for his horse through grooming and feeding treats as part of the reward system for a good lesson."

Recently, while riding a retired Standardbred racehorse who is still learning the finer points of rein and leg aids, Justin steered his mount through a tight serpentine of barrels, the horse bending nicely to make the difficult turns. "That's three apples today, Harley!" Justin yelled after finishing the exercise, overjoyed by their success.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD THERAPY HORSE?

Not every horse is suited to working in a therapeutic riding environment. The therapy horse must be exceptionally patient, calm and gentle. If he is to be used for physical rehabilitation, he also needs a balanced, strong walking gait in order to best help the rider mobilize his joints and strengthen his muscles. Riding a horse moves the human body much the same way that walking does, and it is this repeated, regular movement that brings so many physical benefits.

The best therapy horses clearly understand their jobs and sense the difference between an "ordinary" rider and one with special needs.



Tyhme Thompson, a 20-year-old woman who suffered a serious spinal cord injury two years ago in an ATV accident, has experienced the benefits of equine movement firsthand.

True to his word, he fed Harley three sliced apples after the lesson was finished and the grooming was done.

More than just a “job”

Treats are important, but it takes more than apples to keep a therapeutic riding horse happy and healthy. NARHA (North American Riding for the Handicapped Association) communications director Kay Marks explains that a growing number of therapeutic riding centers are employing the services of a conditioning trainer to keep their horses physically fit and prevent mental burnout. “Horses are the most important resource any centre has,” she says. “They must always be treated as partners in the therapeutic process, not as a tool to be used.”

The best therapy horses clearly understand their jobs and sense the difference between an “ordinary” rider and one with special needs, tolerating an off-balance seat, overzealous rein aids or enthusiastic yelling. Standing patiently to be groomed and carefully taking a carrot from a shaky hand may simply be what we expect from our horses, but it can also be the basis of a connection with much greater meaning. For a rider whose only freedom from a wheelchair comes on the back of a horse, or a child who struggles to form relationships in the world, the memory of that soft muzzle brushing the palms of her hand may be what sustains her until next week’s visit to the barn. ©

LILLIAN TEPERA LIVES WITH HER FAMILY AT STONEGATE FARM NORTH OF TORONTO WHERE SHE HAS BEEN RUNNING A THERAPEUTIC RIDING PROGRAM SINCE 2007. SHE HAS RECENTLY WRITTEN A BOOK ABOUT HER EXPERIENCES, CALLED *HORSEFEATHERS: THE THERAPEUTIC EFFECT OF EQUUS*. PLEASE VISIT THE STONEGATE FAMILY AT STONEGATEFARM.CA.

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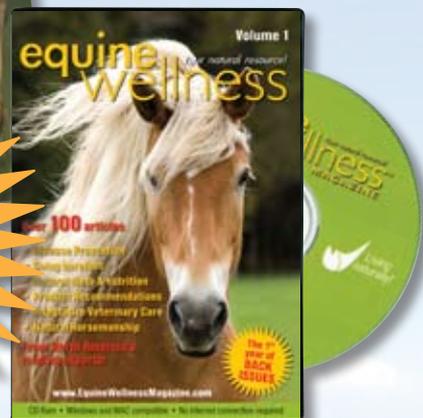
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