

by Anne Caine and Wendy Roberts, P.T.

Fun, Freedom and Physio

Back in the Saddle

"I cannot walk, or run or play a game of tennis everyday," writes John A. Davies. "I cannot dance or ride a bike. I'll never know what skating's like."

"I'll never sail the wind or surf or chase a ball across the turf. Nor climb the snow capped peaks above, so many thrills I'll never love."

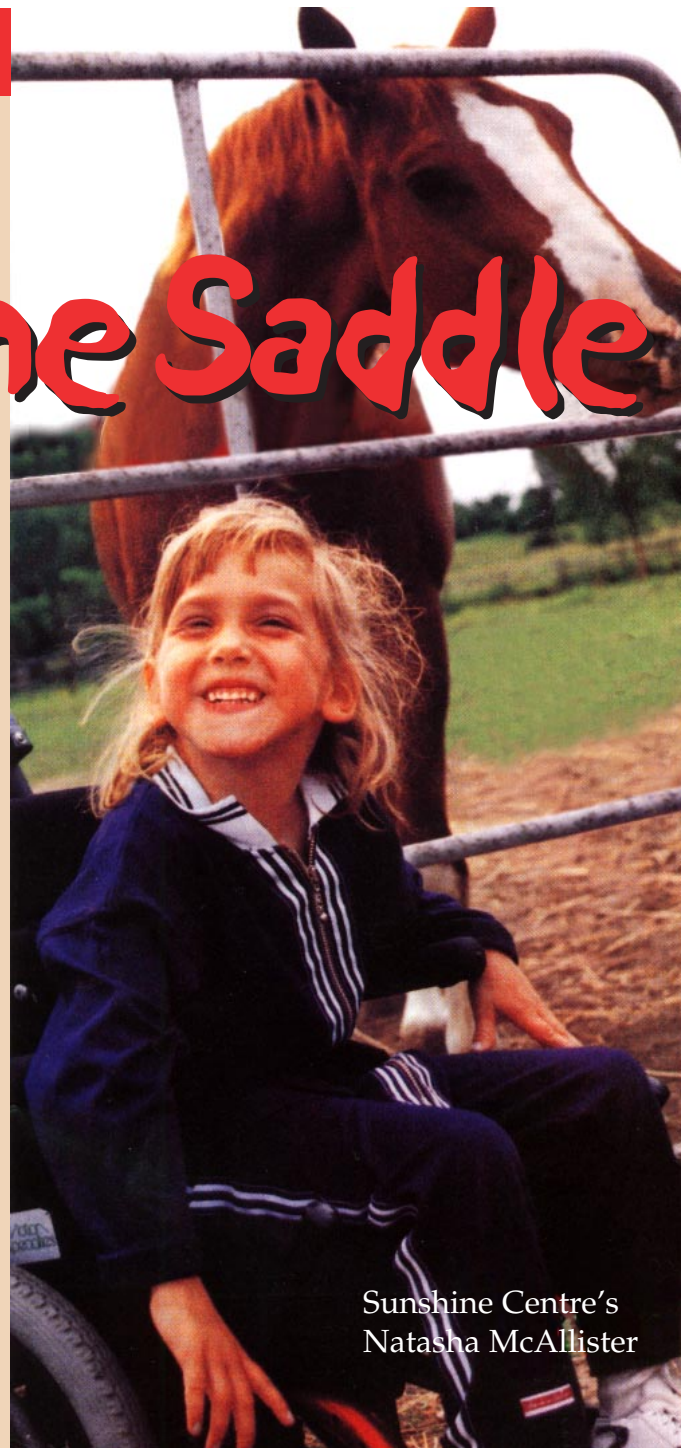
"But I CAN ride through forest trails, to see the fox and rabbit tails. And watch the geese and ducks take flight, while leaping stags and deer take fright."

"Yes, I enjoy the 'Sport of Kings', when carried high my feet take wings. To fly me on a pleasure course, for I CAN mount and ride a horse."

In John A. Davies' poem entitled *I Can*, he magnanimously underscores the charge of one of the most unsung associations serving people with disabilities. He celebrates a confidence that comes with looking down on the world after years of looking up. He extols an independence that comes with taking some control. He applauds the new-found freedom that the horse loans him.

Davies' poem may serve as an anthem for hundreds of kids and adults alike, who ride tall in the saddle, backs straight, high above the daily challenges associated with a disability.

It also speaks well for the services offered by the Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association (CanTRA) and the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA). CanTRA was formed in 1980 to promote riding for disabled individuals. With nearly 100 riding centres across Canada, CanTRA works



Sunshine Centre's
Natasha McAllister

to provide high quality therapeutic recreation and sport programs to help enhance physical, psychological, and social development within participants. NARHA was founded in 1969 to promote and support therapeutic riding in the U.S. At some 525 NARHA riding centres, more than 26,000 individuals with disabilities find a sense of independence through horseback riding. These centres range in size from small, one-person programs to large operations with several instructors and therapists.

“Riding for the Disabled Associations” first surfaced in Europe following World War II. Rehabilitation centres offered war-injured soldiers the opportunity to ride horses, assisted by nurses and local women, as informally organized therapy. Perhaps the event that had the most impact on the popularity of riding for disabled people was when Denmark’s Mdme. Lise Hartnell, who lived with the effects of poliomyelitis, put aside her crutches and rode to a spirited silver medal in the 1952 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden.

Traditionally, riding has been regarded as an elitist pursuit guarded by the rich – not the case with CanTRA and NARHA. Since their inception, these organizations have been teaching riders that spirit is most important. And while each umbrella organization provides a national insurance policy, an instructor certification program and competitive equestrian opportunities locally,

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nationally, and internationally, each’s strength lies in its network of local centres across its respective country.

Each local centre offers programming with its own unique focus. While one may offer physical therapy with the therapist using the horse’s movement to influence the body of the rider (hippotherapy), another may focus more on recreation and competitive sport. Regardless of its approach, each riding centre offers its participants with disabilities an exposure to a sense of freedom and achievement while enjoying the outdoors. For many of these students, irrespective of age, riding may be their only exposure to such freedom of

movement.

After falling from her horse at a show, Eileen Flickinger, 40, of Hamburg, Pennsylvania, suffered an injury to her brain stem and spent three months in a coma. She had been a rider since the age of five, so it was not a surprise when she insisted that riding would continue to be a part of her life during, and after, her recovery.

On the joys of learning to ride again, Eileen remarks, “When I throw down that cane, get out of the wheelchair, climb on the back of my steady steed, I am independent and I love it. Slowly my balance improves. I’ve started cantering and although I will never soar over fences again, my confidence in myself soars, for I have become a ‘master’ of at least one other being. Self-esteem and confidence in myself and what I can and might do has returned.” She adds, “Only a person with a disability can feel the exhilaration of moving as fast as a non-disabled person can move on the ground.”

Therapeutic riding is a unique form of therapy because it espouses a holistic approach to rehabilitation. Lessons are tailored to the rider’s need for specific therapy, whether it be physical, behavioural, speech, occupational or even infant stimulation therapy.

The passive form of riding therapy is called hippotherapy, where the horse becomes a therapeutic apparatus. Instead of actively learning to ride, the individual sits passively on the horse and automatically reacts to the three-dimensional swinging motions of the horse’s back. The movements of a walking horse facilitate almost identical patterns of movement in the rider’s pelvis and trunk. In other words, when we walk, our pelvis moves in the same way as the rider’s pelvis is moved by a walking horse.

“A horse’s walking action mimics your body

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action,” explains Dr. Louis Wagner, retired chest and vascular surgeon from Franklin, Pennsylvania. “When you put someone on a horse, in order to keep their balance, they have to move their trunk, arms, shoulders, head and the rest of their body. Only a live creature can make happen what is so beneficial.” Wagner continues, “Nautilus™ and other exercise machines work only one group of muscles at a time. They don’t require you to respond to them with natural body movements. A horse makes your whole body respond in a smoothly rhythmic, progressive way.”

Movement along the horse’s back is key to hippotherapy. The horse shifts its weight from side to side. As each leg travels beneath its body, there is a natural rotation similar to the up and down motion and pelvic tilt of the human gait. And interestingly, a walking horse’s length of stride is nearly identical to that of an adult. It is the horse’s rhythmic swinging movement that serves to strengthen muscles, improve balance, co-ordination and circulation in the rider. Because hippotherapy requires a professional therapist on hand, not all riding centres employ this form of therapy.

Other aspects of therapeutic riding involve socialization, recreation, outdoor activity, interaction of people and animals, the challenge of an exciting sport, and the learning of useful skills which include care and responsibility for an animal. It is not a scientific approach, but it is impossible to separate the physical and emotional benefits of therapeutic riding. Many of the centres also provide life skills training, rehabilitation and employment opportunities for disabled individuals of all ages. One such facility is the Sunrise Equestrian and Recreation Centre in Guelph, Ontario.

At Sunrise, the opportunity to ride is a great motivator but the involvement in the grooming, tacking, and preparation of the horse plays a major role in the therapeutic process. Alison Lidster has experienced the excitement and stimulation of riding. Seven years ago Alison was an aspiring young Toronto film director when she fell eight feet from a balcony. Alison sustained a traumatic

brain injury, and remained in a coma for three months. During that time her mother, Vera, was particularly tenacious in her nursing care and never gave up hope for Alison’s survival. She talked to her daughter consistently through those months, stroking and touching her to help stimulate her senses.

After three years of arduous daily therapy to battle her congenitive deficits and partial paralysis, Alison moved to her own home where she now lives independently with two support workers. According to Alison, the most significant and motivating change in her life occurred in 1993 when she began riding a horse. She joined the Guelph-based therapeutic riding program in 1994, where she has been riding ever since.

Her father, Peter, is quick to praise the riding program, affirming that it has had a tremendous influence on Alison’s life. He regards her involvement with this program as the most positive accomplishment since her accident. It has developed her social skills, improved her self-esteem and in general has had a profound psychological impact.

Alison started riding with a leader and two side walkers to assist her balance. Today, she uses only a leader, her posture having improved considerably. Occasionally Alison rides independently which is a remarkable achievement.

Both Peter and Vera know that riding Motley, her wonderful horse and friend, is the highlight of their daughter’s week. In fact, it is such a focal point for Alison that everything else pivots around her visit the Sunrise Centre. She does arrive with expectations of merely sitting on the horse. She needs no encouragement to groom Motley and assist with tacking.

Alison has made great strides with her speech since her injury, but never is she more fluent and animated than when she is communicating about her horse and riding. “This is my favourite part of the week – this is something new that I love to do!” The smile on Alison’s face says it all.

Unlike Alison, Natasha McAllister who is also in the riding program, was born with a

disability. Her motor skills and speech did not develop as they should. Natasha has cerebral palsy. Natasha began riding when she was almost five years old, an addition to her extensive therapy regimen.

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In addition to the horses, Natasha has been exposed to cats, rabbits, and other animals at the farm. She loves to feel the fur of a cat against her cheek, but most of all she delights in leaving her wheelchair behind and sitting astride her horse Chelsea. Her mother & father say that the sense of freedom this activity offers cannot compare with anything else in which Natasha could become involved. Brownies, softball, and so many other childhood pursuits are not viable options for her. She is involved in music therapy but riding is top of the list for father, mother and daughter. Bonding with the horse is an important part of the success of these programs. The smile that spreads across this little girl’s face delights everyone. She has bonded with Chelsea and takes pride in her achievements at the end of every ride, always striving to achieve more each week.

Natasha rides on a pad held on the horse by a leather strap – a surcingle – which is secured around the horse’s barrel. The surcingle has two solid handles for the rider to grasp, but Natasha’s grip on these handles has improved considerably. She uses arm splints to keep her elbows straight and has two side walkers to ensure she keeps her hands on the handles. Her legs have come down and are more relaxed. Her parents have noticed that Natasha’s head is much more stable since starting the riding. There has been a marked improvement in a short time. And like Alison, Natasha has found unconditional acceptance within the wonderful world of animals.

When Alison and Natasha came to Sunrise

Rider, Instructor & Volunteer

the instructors looked not so much at what the riders could not do, but at their capabilities and potential to get stronger, better balanced, learn new skills, and exercise in a safe, nurturing environment. The whole person, not just their physical needs, was considered. For example, their social skills improved as they worked as part of a group at various tasks in the barn. Alison helps to put her tack away after the ride, socializes with her instructor and learns to help care for her horse.

Chelsea, Natasha’s horse, was chosen especially for her – not so big as to be intimidating or difficult for the side walkers, and not too wide so as to make Natasha uncomfortable. Imagine how she must feel – out of the safety of her chair and now above all these grown-ups – looking down at their heads and going along at such a pace! Initially, Natasha was up on the horse for only short periods of time – learning the movements of the horse. Her back muscles, not used to having to hold erect, tired very quickly and she had a hard time adjusting to all that was going

Horses Wanted

Across North America, thousands of horses help individuals with disabilities leave their wheelchairs and crutches behind. They help improve lost motion control, muscle tone, balance, coordination, and self-esteem. Most riding centres are constantly on the lookout for suitable horses. Some are donated, others leased, still others are bought. However, not every mount is suitable. What qualifies a horse for therapeutic activities? Many things, but in particular, horses used for therapeutic activities should possess a quiet, spook-proof attitude, smooth gaits, good manners, pleasant temperament and physical soundness. Horses should not be too young and inexperienced, nor so old they are no longer agile. And, if a horse understands basic voice commands, that’s a big plus in the horse’s favour. At all riding centres, potential horses are put through a series of tests and must pass a probationary period before they are accepted.

on at the same time. Today she is able to maintain her position as the horse changes pace and direction. Often these skills are practiced as games by incorporating intellectual skills such as identifying objects, colours, and shapes in a fun way.

Therapeutic riding brings a new dimension

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to the lives of riders. This new-found form of recreation simultaneously improves balance, coordination, strength, and motor planning skills without the stigma attached to most “therapy” programs. Therapy, in the traditional sense, for anyone with a long-term disability can be dead boring, whereas participation in an approved therapeutic riding program with qualified instructors is fun, beneficial, and life enhancing.

Sunrise Program Director Nicola Thibodeau is a certified therapeutic riding instructor and examiner. In addition to teaching student riders, she also teaches others how to instruct riders based on their specific disability. The majority of Sunrise’s students are children with disabilities, both developmental and physical, but it has classes for teens and adults as well. Sunrise also runs an integrated summer day camp, augmenting its riding program with nature studies, hiking, fishing, swimming, and sports & crafts for kids with and without a disability. In the past, as part of the program, student rider Michelle Renaud, who is deaf, offered sign language classes.

When visiting Sunrise and watching the students going through their various activities

with their mounts, one thing is quite evident – these are not “pony ride” activities. Even the horses go through a training session, and only horses of high calibre are used. “All our horses have to be fit with very strong backs to accommodate uneven weight loads,” says Thibodeau.

It is all very professional. Those students who have never been on a horse start off with three volunteers, one leading the horse and one on either side. Those leading have experience with horses. As such, riding centres rely heavily on volunteers.

Jill Barker, a certified riding coach for disabled students and the head instructor at the Halifax Junior Bengal Lancers arena, says it is hard to get good volunteers. “A lot of people want to do too much for others. We must allow for the disability, but encourage the students to do the things they can do for themselves,” she contends. “We’re not there to hold them on,” explained Barker in an interview with Halifax’s *Chronicle-Herald*, “we’re there to support them when they need it..” Barker relates that many disabled people are not comfortable with the fact that they’re not allowed to take risks. She believes that there is much dignity associated with risk. “If they are ready to try something new, I’m here to support and encourage them.”

All in all, some 200 volunteers help out at Sunrise, doing everything from mucking out stalls to raising funds. The program gets some funding from the United Way and from government. “A lot of people really don’t know what we’re about, and it is difficult to explain it,” says Thibodeau. “They learn more if they come out and see what is going on, if they see someone get out of a wheelchair, get on a horse and ride.”

Our friend the horse serves us well as a therapeutic tool enabling its human masters to maximize their abilities. Fly me on a pleasure course, for I can mount and ride a horse.

For more information regarding this article contact Wendy Roberts P.T. at (902) 423-1594 or Ann Caine at (519) 763-0304. Both Wendy and Ann have been involved in Therapeutic

Riding for over twenty years, serving on boards and committees at the local, national, and international levels. They are also actively involved at local centres.

For More Information On Therapeutic Riding Programs in Your Area:

Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association
(CanTRA), P.O. Box 24009, Guelph, ON N1E 6Z8.
Tel: (519) 767-0700. Each centre has its own
emphasis either on recreation, hippotherapy, or
sport; some combine all three.

North American Riding for the Handicapped
Association (NARHA), P.O. Box 33150, Denver,
CO 80233. Tel: (800) 369-RIDE (7433).

Easter Seals Society Therapeutic Riding Programs
in the US: National Easter Seal Society,
Information and Referral, 230 West Monroe St.,
Chicago, IL 60606. Tel: (800) 221-6827. Web
Site: www.seals.com