

The Therapy Horse: An Integral Player

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Therapeutic riding is for people of all ages with various disabilities, and it has become very popular. For horses, however, the invitation is much more re-stricted. There are specialized expectations of a horse used in therapeutic riding. If there were a Therapy Horse Admissions Test ("THAT") analogous to the SAT or GRE, competitive scores for THAT would start at 700.

Foremost, a therapy horse needs to be safe, predictable, and sound. He has to be intelligent, well-conditioned, unflappable, sensitive, patient, hard-working, balanced, and versatile. He must also be tolerant of unpredictable noises and positional changes made by riders, and responsive to his handler's instructions. These qualifications insure safety for the rider, and provide an environment that allows the rider to enjoy and benefit from his or her experiences with horses.

The benefits to the rider are much more extensive than most people know. In addition to learning riding skills, the rider develops physical strength, flexibility, and coordination. Exercises specific to the person's disabilities are employed to improve motor skills and improve balance and body awareness. Communication and expressive language skills also develop. All of these benefits enhance self-esteem.

Just as the horse improves quality of life for the rider, quality of life is equally as important for the horse. Daniel Feeney, DVM, the regular veterinarian for several therapeutic riding centers in Connecticut and Florida, recommends “ample turnout, a regulated workload, consistent exercise by able-bodied riders, and high-quality nutrition and veterinary care” as some of the ways to keep therapy horses healthy and happy.

What kind of horse can meet the many needs of the therapeutic riding population? Too often people think that any older, mild-mannered, semi-sound horse of any size fits the bill. On the contrary, the ideal therapy horse is between the ages of eight and 12, around 15 hands high, and highly athletic. A stable’s therapeutic riding herd should include horses of different breeds and conformations to offer a wide variety of movement types.

The reality of finding suitable horses is that most therapeutic riding farms have to compromise to some extent. They accept horses that come closest to meeting the criteria, then use specialized training programs to work on areas of weakness. Many of these organizations are non-profit, and significant portions of funds raised go to supporting the costs of riders. Luckily, therapeutic riding centers across the country get phone calls on a regular basis from horse owners looking to give or lease their horses. Each center has its own methods of evaluating a prospective therapy horse.

Evaluating a Potential Therapy Horse

At High Hopes Therapeutic Riding in Old Lyme, Conn., the first step taken to evaluate a potential therapy horse is to obtain a background and medical history on the animal. The staff reviews a video of the horse showing the walk, trot, and canter with a rider. They might visit the horse on site, and/or bring the horse in for a trial period.

As former barn manager, Kristin Elliott-Leas of High Hopes explains, “While many of our horses are donated, we also fundraise to allow for purchasing horses to meet certain needs.”

For example, several years ago High Hopes bought a 16.1-hand, 17-year-old Canadian Thoroughbred gelding named Doc. He was selected for independent walk-trot-canter riders as well as for hippotherapy, which uses the movement of the horse to treat

specific physical, sensory, and speech and language disabilities. According to Carolyn Jagielski, physical therapist and therapeutic riding instructor, “Doc is very good at long-lining, which gives the rider better movement and the horse handler better control of that movement. By tracking-up, Doc produces more rotation in the rider’s pelvis, which is a key element in achieving relaxation in abnormally tight muscles. He is narrow, and therefore good for riders who have cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis and experience spasticity (severe muscle tightness) in their legs. When we first got him he could jump well, and that was good for our independent riders.”

Greco: A Good Therapy Horse

Greco is a 16.1-hand, 21-year-old Oldenburg gelding whose owner donated him to High Hopes for use in the therapy program. Prior to going to High Hopes, Greco was a Grand Prix dressage horse that—according to his owner Karen Horn—“was ready for a change of pace.” She could not bear to retire him with her other horses at her farm because she wanted him to be able to continue to interact with people, “because he thrives on being admired.”

She was right. Greco fit perfectly into the program. Instead of doing piaffes and turns on the forehand with his riders as he did in dressage, he does beautifully controlled transitions and gives balanced, forward movement with plenty of impulsion to challenge his rider’s balance.

When Things Don’t Work Out

Have you ever started a new job or hobby, thinking that it was just what you wanted to do, only to find yourself dissatisfied with it down the line? This is just what happened to Kansas, a 15-hand, 20-year-old Thoroughbred cross, who after passing all therapy horse admissions tests with flying colors and working in High Hopes’ program successfully for 1 1/2 years, became unhappy in his role.

It was an easy decision to bring Kansas onboard, recalls Elliott-Leas. Staff and volunteers found him to be a perfect mount for therapeutic riding and were particularly impressed with his demeanor and charm. Given his background as a polo horse, he was accustomed to frequent weight shifts by his riders, and he was comfortable with various

movements going on around him. Needless to say, he was readily accepted into the program.

Kansas spent an entire year seeming to enjoy his life and work at High Hopes. He shared a four-acre pasture and run-in shed with two other horses and worked in the program five days a week. He was willing and friendly, and he consistently impressed people with his abilities to work effectively with riders of all ages, with different disabilities and riding levels.

In his second year at High Hopes, the staff, volunteers, and riders began noticing changes in his behavior. Elliott-Leas recalls that “he seemed uncomfortable having sidewalkers due to their close proximity to him, was less tolerant of abrupt movements by his riders, and was easily agitated during grooming.”

Based on these changes, he was given several weeks off, but it did not appear to help. Over the next six months, he was injured in his pasture and developed a hematoma on his back, which called for more time off. His workload was re-structured so that he participated only with riders needing little or no assistance from volunteers. Unfortunately, none of these attempts worked to bring back the “old” Kansas.

The initial step in the procedure for discharging horses from High Hopes is to contact the former owner to give him/her the option of taking the horse back, finding an alternative home, or allowing High Hopes to search for a new home, says Elliott-Leas. Kansas’ previous owner elected to have High Hopes find Kansas a new home. According to his current owner, Kansas seems to be back to his old self.

The Impact on Therapy Horses

There is no dispute that therapy horses work very hard. They must stand quietly, always be attentive to the needs of their riders and the directions of their handlers, and wait patiently while riders mount and dismount. They are subjected to all levels of rider ability, and must develop skills particular to therapy horses (i.e., tolerance of wheelchairs, ramps, leg braces, and unusual rider noises). Due to this uniquely taxing workload, it is reasonable to expect that therapy horses experience a significant amount of stress.

To find out if this is in fact the case, Marie Suthers-McCabe, DVM, an associate professor of human-companion animal interaction at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, and Lynn Albano, DVM, a 2004 graduate of the vet school, designed and conducted a research study. They worked with 32 horses in four different types of equine-assisted programs. They tested blood cortisol levels twice a day—pre- and post-therapy sessions—as an indicator of stress level. In addition, the horses were videotaped during therapy sessions to evaluate behavior.

Suthers-McCabe says their results “indicate that 82% of these therapy horses are not experiencing elevations in blood cortisol levels, suggesting that equine-assisted therapy is not stressful for most horses.

“Two of the five horses with elevated levels were easily explained,” she says. “One was new to the program and experiencing stressful herd dynamics, and another had a rider balancing on her mouth.”

Also of note was that “in one horse, a comparison was made between changes in cortisol levels working with (mounted) physically disabled clients and the same horse working with (unmounted) mental health clients. This horse showed the lowest post-therapy cortisol level after working in a therapeutic riding program and the highest after working in an un-mounted equine-facilitated psychotherapy session.”

Suthers-McCabe gave this possible explanation of the results: “We may have skewed our population because of the type of horses used. These horses have sound minds and were selected for that trait.”

Based on these findings, she hopes to do further research “to determine correlations that will help people select the best horses for the work, and in turn modify the work to best suit the horses.”

Take-Home Message

The high expectations set for therapy horses are directly related to the high demands of the work that is expected of them. Therapeutic riding is a sport unmatched in its uniqueness and effectiveness in providing inspiration, self-confidence, and opportunities to improve physical health and cognitive and psychological well being. If you think your horse might be suited to these tasks, you can contact a local therapeutic riding center and discuss a donation or leasing. To find a therapeutic riding center, contact the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (www.narha.org) for information on more than 700 programs nationwide.

