

Prenessa going over trotting poles on her faithful steed, Thomas
Photos by Gerda Hamm



Riding therapy for the disabled

by Theresa Odendaal

“In riding a horse, we borrow freedom.” These words are the inspiration behind the South African Riding for the Disabled Association (Sarda). Most riders don’t think twice about walking up to a horse, mounting it and taking off. But some riders have to. Some have to be wheeled to the horse, assisted or even lifted onto it and in some cases even supported while on its back.

SA Horseman visited the Johannesburg branch of Sarda and spoke to Jenny Ford, one of the instructors, who introduced us to some of the children who receive therapy there.

James (12) is autistic. Some ten months ago James was first brought to Sarda and it appears that riding is one of the therapies that he enjoys

most. According to Jenny, riding therapy is ideal for autistic children as many have a good sense of balance and are able to sit on the horse unassisted. The opportunity to develop a relationship with an animal, coupled with the physical benefits of balancing and moving on the horse, is very beneficial. As many cannot tolerate being touched, riding is wonderful – something they can do themselves, using and exercising their muscles without interference.

Another disability for which riding therapy is indicated, is cerebral palsy (CP). Eleven-year-old Prenessa was normal at birth. At about four months, she developed bronchial pneumonia and was repeatedly hospitalised. It soon became obvious that her development was impaired. She was diagnosed as suffering from “global delay”.

Her parents tried almost every kind of therapy available, both here and abroad. Prenessa has

always been besotted with horses and her parents decided to take her to Sarda. After only a month, her progress was remarkable. Apart from her enthusiasm and clear enjoyment, her posture and concentration improved and she is able to carry herself in a much more upright position.

Jenny says that this is not a once-off case. Sometimes, in a single session, one can detect a marked improvement in a pupil.

Benefits

Everything about the activity of riding is beneficial for most physical disabilities. The position on a horse promotes trunk and neck control. As some of the muscles could be spastic (especially in CP), the movement of the horse combined with the balance needed to stay on, tends to reduce such spasticity in the legs. In some CP-patients, spasticity can release after only 2-3 minutes – something that can take 20-30 minutes with physiotherapy and is often very painful. The horse's movement promotes forward-and-backward, side-to-side and up-and-down movement, which relaxes the pelvis, working and educating the muscles used for walking.

According to Jenny, it is imperative though that horse and rider are matched correctly. A horse with a short quicker stride is good for ADD and autistic children, whereas a CP-rider requires a pony with a slightly longer stride.

Patients also benefit emotionally. Those who are confined to a wheelchair can suddenly look down on others from the back of a horse. This builds self-confidence and a sense of self-empowerment. Many Sarda riders go on to compete in disciplines such as dressage and vaulting in both able-bodied and disabled competitions.

Contra-indications

There are some disabilities for which riding therapy is contra-indicated. These include Atlanto Axial Instability – something that can be seen in patients with Down's Syndrome and causes very poor neck and trunk control. Some forms of scoliosis where the curvature of the spine is both front-to-back and side-to-side, are also contra-indicated. Pupils considered to be in these categories need to be assessed and require a full medical report before being accepted into Sarda's programme.



Jenny Ford (centre) with riders Prenessa, Jean, James, and her enthusiastic helpers

Who can benefit?

All Sarda branches, as registered charities, provide free therapeutic riding and sport riding tuition for disabled children and adults, although they do ask for a donation if the family can afford it. Pupils are drawn from a wide range of special schools and centres for the disabled and include the cerebral palsied, deaf, blind, autistic and mentally challenged, as well as those with attention deficit disorder, spina bifida, paraplegia and quadriplegia. At least 75% of all Sarda pupils are from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

How to help

Caring and generous people like Jenny have made all the difference, but Sarda needs funding and assistance. The cost of maintaining centres is high and funded entirely through donations and fund-raising efforts. People can also make a contribution by offering their services as volunteers. Sarda is always on the lookout for Sanef/BHS-qualified instructors to take the Sarda exam and train as instructors and examiners. Old tack is welcome, and horses and ponies are always needed.

Should you wish to find out more or to contribute, you can visit the website at www.sarda.co.za to find out which branch is nearest to you. SAH