

SPORTS 'N SPOKES

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Calming Presence

Horses help people with disabilities gain confidence

A Steady Gait

Adaptive riding and horsemanship can help people with spinal cord injuries reach cognitive goals, regain confidence and improve mental health.

by Jennifer Best

When Kirby Bowling was growing up in Nebraska, horses were no strangers to him. They had jobs to do on the farm and served as his cousin's champion barrel racing mounts. Fast-forward through 26 years in the Air Force, and once again Bowling was looking to horses as a tool. This time, to help him regain mobility.

What he found in the animals and the programs and people they serve were team players, emotional supporters and modes toward mobility.

"The benefits in riding are this long list that are helpful for anyone with a physical condition: increased heart rate, muscle tone, proprioception awareness, where you feel what's happening under you," says Maryland Therapeutic Riding program manager Linsey Erar. "The rider is like a buoy on the wave — the buoy is staying upright on the wave, but not stationary, so it's constantly adjusting to stay on the wave. On the horse, riders get as long and tall as they can get to feel how their hips are moving and feel how the horse's movement is affecting the upper body."



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LAND THERAPEUTIC RIDING



Three years of exposure to burn pits in Afghanistan left the now-Laurel, Md., resident Bowling with neurological issues. In 2019, he arrived in a wheelchair at Maryland Therapeutic Riding in Crownsville, Md., with Wounded Warrior Project. Today, he walks unassisted, teaches resilience, unarmed and armed self-defense, serves as a security consultant and mentors young men. "Being around horses wasn't anything new, but I thought it was intriguing how they're using horses as therapeutic methodology," Bowling says.

Therapeutic Riding Programs

The Maryland Therapeutic Riding program is among more than 600 in the United States with adaptive/therapeutic riding programs certified by Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.). Since 1969, the nonprofit organization has focused on promoting safe and effective therapeutic/adaptive riding through standardized training, certi-

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fication and credentialing among professional equine-assisted service programs.

Today, PATH has more than 4,800 certified professionals who help and support more than 46,000 children and adults — including 5,200 veterans — through a variety of equine-assisted services.

Therapeutic riding, now more often called adaptive riding and horsemanship, differs from hippotherapy, a broader term which includes occupational, physical and speech therapies with the horse as an accessory to the therapy.

“All of these allow patients to work toward clinical goals facilitated by a therapist, but now outside on the back of a horse and in an environment that doesn’t feel like therapy. It feels like we’re riding,” Erar says. “The horse helps them reach their goals and accelerate their goals.”

Programs like hers focus on the physical, as well as social-emotional and cognitive goals, through a blend of mounted and unmounted activities.

“There’s a value in simply caring for them, grooming, teaching the things we do for the horse, not to the horse. There’s so much happening in that learning opportunity that meets way more than the horse-related goal. It touches on independence, self-awareness, bilateral communication, so much when we’re just partnering with a horse and caring for them,” Erar says.

Many riders begin with some form of hippotherapy, move to adaptive riding, then later ride recreationally. Some arrive simply ready to ride.

“Not only is it physically helpful, but also very good for mental health,” says Army veteran Cathy Davis of White Plains, Md. “A lot of times, I get depressed and I’m very sad, but when I get to the horse, it’s like the horse seems to know what mood you’re in. You don’t have to explain yourself. I talk to the horse, praise him. I always feel better after riding. Always.”

Army veteran Cathy Davis, center, says adaptive riding and horsemanship has provided improved strength, mobility and a sense of authority.





Can Help With Confidence

At barns around the country like Little Bit Therapeutic Riding Center in Redmond, Wash., it's not unusual to see a rider wheel up an accessible ramp to the loading platform. Using a lift, the rider is placed in the saddle. Depending upon the rider's skill, injury level and need, a team of volunteers provides support, which may include leading the horse and standing on each side, with their hands on the rider's leg to help steady him or her.

"Initially, I had a lead walker and two side walkers to help me stay on the horse. We were doing basic physical therapy: range of motion, mobility, strength and endurance. PT [physical therapy] is not an easy thing regardless, but when you're doing it on an object that's moving in all directions, it's tough. It's work. I was sweating," Bowling says.

Over time, as riders build skill, confidence and strength, the volunteers reduce their support until, for many, they are minimally present if they remain in the arena at all.

"We have a number of individuals with spinal cord injuries, and what they report gaining from riding is a boost in confidence, relearning how their body interacts and coordinates through space, and the opportunity to engage socially with other individuals with similar interests," says Little Bit Therapeutic Riding Center Adaptive Services Director Devon Stone.

The movement of the horse is similar to the natural movement of walking, so it fires the rider's neural pathways that are ignored when he or she is seated in a chair.

"Riding mimics the anterior/posterior tilt we experience when we're walking," Erar says. "Riders gain so much strength and muscle tone through that motion, moving their hips with the horse's hips. Their respiratory rate is increased, and their neural pathways are all being improved because of the movement of the horse."

At Maryland Therapeutic Riding, a rider is helped onto a horse via a lift.



With adaptive riding and horsemanship, a rider's respiratory rate is increased and neural pathways are improved because of the horse's movement.



COURTESY OF LITTLE BIT THERAPEUTIC RIDING CENTER

Adaptive riding and horsemanship, or therapeutic riding, can help people with spinal cord injuries or in wheelchairs develop confidence, skill and strength.



COURTESY OF MARYLAND THERAPEUTIC RIDING

While riding provided Davis with improved strength and mobility over the course of 15 years, confidence and mental boosts were the earliest benefits she noticed.

"I really like equine therapy because you regain that sense of authority you had when you were in the military, before you were in a wheelchair," she says.

The Department of Veterans Affairs Tampa Health-care System led Davis to adaptive riding while she was living in Florida. An illness-induced traumatic brain injury eventually put her in a wheelchair with no feeling on the entire right side of her body and severely compromised balance.

Davis found her way to Maryland Therapeutic Riding in 2009 and now rides closer to home at Promise Landing Farm in Upper Marlboro, Md.

"It took me about 10 years before I let my side walker, Mitch, let go," she says. "When you're in my situation, sometimes, you know, you're scared to take chances, so I probably could have done it earlier. Now, I think just having my side walker there, knowing he will grab me and won't let me hurt myself, gives me that confidence."

While it began as therapy, horseback riding has become a way of life for Davis. It is the impetus for everything else she does to keep fit.

"It's funny — I started riding as therapy, but now I keep fit so I can ride. My husband says that I'm more active when I ride, so I guess it works," Davis says. "The way the horses move helps improve my balance, for sure. As I've gotten older, there's a lot I've given up, but I can't give up horseback riding. I'll always ride."

The first step to riding is calling a local barn. Learn what programs they offer and share with them the rider's goals. Some will direct potential riders to applications that can help them communicate their interests and needs. For physical therapy, suitably staffed programs may need a physician's referral.

Most do not work with insurance companies, but when referred by a physician for therapy at qualified programs, will provide receipts riders can send to their insurers. Many are funded at least in part through grants and fundraising, which could cover all or a portion of the costs for qualified riders.

To find a riding program in your area or for more information, visit pathintl.org.

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Riding A Horse Of Course

COURTESY OF LITTLE BIT THERAPEUTIC RIDING CENTER



Here are some resources to help you get started with adaptive riding and horsemanship:

- **Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH Intl.)**, pathintl.org
- **Maryland Therapeutic Riding, Crownsville, Md.**, 410-923-6800, horsethatheal.org
- **Little Bit Therapeutic Riding Center, Redmond, Wash.**, 425-882-1554, littlebit@littlebit.org
- **Promise Landing Farm, Upper Marlboro, Md.**, 301-249-2971, promiselandingfarm.org
- **National Ability Center, Park City, Utah**, discovernac.org/program/adaptive-horseback-riding
- **Shangri-La Therapeutic Academy of Riding's Heroes & Horses program, Lenoir City, Tenn.**, 865-988-4711, rideatstar.org/heroes--horses.html