

THERAPEUTIC RIDING

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

By Ina El Kobbia, Germany



▲ *Therapeutic Riding is fun for the little ones*

HISTORY RECORDS PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES RIDING HORSES AS EARLY AS THE ANCIENT GREEKS; IT WAS ACKNOWLEDGED THAT RIDING WAS MORE THAN MEANS OF TRANSPORTATION; IT WAS A WAY OF IMPROVING THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF PEOPLE.

The first study of the value of riding as therapy was reported in 1875. French physician Cassaign used riding as a treatment for a variety of conditions, and concluded that it was helpful in the treatment of certain kinds of neurological disorders by improving posture, balance and joint movement, as well as psychological conditions. England recognised riding for the disabled as a beneficial form of therapy and offered riding therapy for wounded soldiers at the Oxford Hospital during World War I. Riding therapy was introduced in Scandinavia in 1946 after two devastating outbreaks of poliomyelitis. Liz Hartel, the Danish equestrian legend, was stricken with the disease. She brought worldwide attention to riding for the disabled when she won the silver medal for Dressage at the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games. In Germany Therapeutic Riding was particularly recognised after World War II. German Dr. Max Reichenbach was the first who shaped the use of the term "Therapeutic Riding", in 1953 and Germany took a leading role ever after in the introduction and development of "Hippotherapy", which forms part of Therapeutic Riding and can be described as physiotherapy on a horse; the horse offers 110 multidimensional movements by impulsion/minutes. No therapist, no matter how motivated or talented, and no machine can compete with this quality stimulation!

Today Therapeutic Riding is acknowledged worldwide and is defined as equine assisted activities encompassing riding, vaulting and a range of pedagogic and psychological treatments next to the mentioned Hippotherapy, which is considered a medical treatment, whereby the horse is in all cases the centre medium.

Therapeutic Riding has myriad benefits; it improves balance, joint mobility, coordination, muscle tone and posture, and it can ease symptoms of a wide variety of disabilities, including brain injuries, multiple sclerosis, hearing or visual impairments, muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, learning disabilities, Down syndrome and cardiovascular disease. Additionally, it helps students improve motor skills, self-esteem, concentration and problem-solving abilities. It is fair to

say that Therapeutic Riding is by far the most successful and most acknowledged rehabilitation method using an animal.

Internationally, Therapeutic Riding is represented by the International Federation of Riding for the Disabled, FRDI, registered in Belgium. This international organisation numbers 32 full member states and 53 associated member states. In Germany the head association is the German Curatorship for Therapeutic Riding (Deutsches Kuratorium für Therapeutisches Reiten) seated in Warendorf, known as Germany's horse sport capital. The Curatorship is a member of the German National Equestrian Federation. In March I met with the Chairwoman of the Association, Mrs. Cornelia von Ruxleben-Plöger who has been heading the association since 2004 and is a passionate and professional horse rider herself. Besides, she is a physiotherapist and is additionally licensed for Hippotherapy and disability sport.

With regard to the fact that the German Curatorship celebrates its 40th anniversary this year, I asked Mrs. von Ruxleben-Plöger about her view on the development of Therapeutic Riding. She answered with zeal, "Around fifty or sixty years ago there was only a handful of idealists in this area; already in 1970 the German Curatorship for Therapeutic Riding commenced its work as a federal association and today one can say that there is a nationwide offer for therapeutic riding including educational programmes.



▲ Chairwoman Mrs. von Ruxleben-Plöger

Moreover we cooperate with universities in order to further develop it in the academic field. I envisage a successful future for Therapeutic Riding. Each of us know how wonderful it is to sit on a horse. Horses don't differentiate between healthy and disabled persons, yet they are sensitive enough to notice the different needs of people. The most delightful effect is that those who receive treatment through therapeutic riding, especially children, don't even feel that they are undergoing a therapy, it is foremost joy for them!"

To my surprise, I replied, "even though Therapeutic Riding is highly popular, the German Federal Health Ministry declared in 2006 that Therapeutic Riding, Hippotherapy in particular, is lacking clear evidence as

▼ A demonstration of Therapeutic Riding with the trainer/therapist





▲ Therapeutic Riding is part of the programme at Hof Kasselmann where its host Ulrich Kasselmann (far right) is one of its great supporters


a medically successful treatment; thereby public health insurers do not cover the therapy costs.” Mrs. von Ruxleben-Plöger then explained, “Plenty of successful experiences exist already; the point however is, that German public health law requires the fulfilment of a number of concrete conditions to allow for public acknowledgement. We are currently working on that, we want to provide proof through a scientific study with 120 probands, whereby five medical centres are involved, amongst them the clinical centres of the Universities of Aachen, Bochum and Tuebingen. I am positive as to the outcome!”

In 2009 Mrs. von Ruxleben-Plöger was the host of the 13th International Conference on Therapeutic Riding, with some 1,000 participants from 39 different nations. In that regard, I asked the Chairwoman how important international relations have been to her? “Very important”, she answered. “Our international conference takes place every three years during which we exchange views, experiences and strategies. Besides, the German Curatorship for Therapeutic Riding also grants professional assistance to foreign

institutions and facilities that wish to establish Therapeutic Riding in their own country. Several years ago we supported Hungary in its effort to establish Therapeutic Riding; today Hungary has the same professional standards as Germany. In recent time we also started working on a Therapeutic Riding centre in the United Arab Emirates.”

What are the characteristics of a good therapy-horse and equally of a good therapist, I continued asking. “First, a quality horse must have at least a height of 1.65 m; it has to be healthy and should have a good character”, she replied. “One should not underestimate the work and stress a therapy-horse is being exposed to. Therefore it is essential for us that a therapy-horse gets sufficient rest and is being re-ridden by professionals. As to the characteristics of a good therapist, I can say that our education for therapists is of the highest degree; at first the candidate undergoes the usual education programme for therapists, in a second step he/she receives through us special training for therapeutic riding.”

On another note, I responded, I am very impressed by the fact that the Curatorship is not only responsible for Therapeutic Riding but also covers the very different field of Para Equestrian, which is substantially different from the area of therapy! Mrs. von Ruxleben-Pöger explained, “It is internationally not at all unusual that an association that covers Therapeutic Riding also covers Para Equestrian Sport! When we come to notice, that a rider has special riding talents, we try to promote this rider to become an Olympic Champion. We have witnessed already some extraordinary riding talents. Ever since Para Equestrian has become the eighth discipline of the FEI, we receive substantial support from our National Equestrian Federation, which is of great value to us.”

At the end of the interview I must personally say that I have been overwhelmed by the enormous capacity of Therapeutic Riding and the active support it receives by so many; it makes the world a better place! 

Photos by Gerlinde Hoffmann & Vera Loose