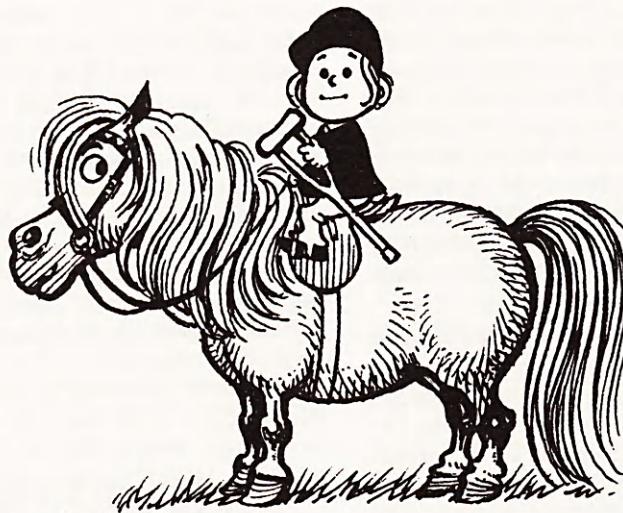


Tall in the saddle

JOAN BICKNELL



Riding can supply the childhood sense of excitement and adventure that the restricted life of a handicapped child so often lacks. Apart from the fun, a pony can provide the stimulus to improve the performance of a child struggling to reach full potential. The Diamond Riding Group works to bring pony and child together.

'But why put a handicapped child on a pony? Surely they have enough to contend with already'. This is the question that springs to the minds of many people when they hear of mentally and physically handicapped children learning to ride. It has been put to me on several occasions.

Answering the question I always hope to explain the psychological benefits that may come to handicapped children who have the opportunity to ride. As a starting point, perhaps Timothy's story will give some idea of the possible advantages.

Timothy is 7. He is mentally handicapped and intermittently paralysed. Most of the time he has the

use of his limbs and can run, climb and ride his bicycle. But every few weeks he becomes temporarily paralysed which makes him frustrated and cross. Partly because of his handicap he is not able to be cared for at home and lives in a foster home.

When Timothy started pony riding it was assumed that, when he was paralysed, he would not attend. However, he was encouraged to come on those days and to his delight he found that, with a helper on either side, he could still ride. When playing 'tag' with the other children on their ponies he was seen to use his paralysed hand. Timothy has found an interest in life that few other children of his age can

share. Not only have there been physical improvements but also there has been progress in his speech and in his general attitude towards helping himself.

Initial success stories like Timothy's encouraged a small group to organise pony riding facilities for as many mentally and physically handicapped children as possible. This group, now known as the Diamond Riding Group, is a rapidly expanding organisation which provides riding classes for handicapped children living in South London. The main difficulty is that the ponies are freely available in the country and most handicapped children live in towns. Bringing the two together needs careful planning.

The cost of land and of keeping ponies in London is astronomical but the Group have plans to continue expansion and provide facilities which will enable the handicapped to ride in all weathers. The most urgent need is an indoor riding school and already £5,000 has been raised towards the cost of such a building.

The Diamond Riding Group draws on voluntary help a great deal. It has a committee; and an instructor, a physiotherapist and legal and medical advisors. The list of helpers includes many riders, policemen, housewives, senior school pupils and volunteers from youth organisations.

At present, classes are held in the open on Fridays and Saturdays, one for children who live at home and the other for children who are in Queen Mary's Hospital, Carshalton—for this session, ponies are taken into the grounds of the hospital. To date about 70 physically handicapped and mentally handicapped children are enjoying the opportunities for riding provided by the DRG. Some are able to take part in half-hour lessons with individual tuition on the elements of riding, exercises and, finally, competitive games: for the more severely handicapped there is the joy of a pony ride round the field.

The Group is part of the Riding for the Disabled Association and is the first to serve the needs of South London and the first to provide riding facilities for a children's hospital. It is pioneer work and the members know that much depends on their success or failure. Once an indoor school is built, there is no reason why special schools should not send their handicapped pupils to it as part of their physical education curriculum.

Why, though, is the Group so keen to provide this extra activity for handicapped children? All children like to live dangerously and to run those risks that are part of childhood; climbing trees, scrambling on rocks at the seaside and swinging from ropes make life exciting and develop both a sense of fear and a longing for adventure. The handicapped child is so often unable to share, or is deprived of, these childhood escapades. For this reason the first effect when

a handicapped child begins to ride is often psychological. The ponies are carefully selected, there are three helpers to each pony and hard hats are worn, but the elements of excitement, competition and danger (in the child's mind) remain.

The first contact the child has with the pony is important. By touching a warm, soft, living creature, each child begins to establish a relationship with the pony who will help him to have (quite literally) a wider and more exciting view of the world. This is more than riding a tricycle; it is a working relationship with another living creature.

It is often amazing how quickly a handicapped child with little speech will learn the names of the ponies and which one he regards as his special friend. Some children are naturally fearful of this new experience. But fear is an emotional expression which gives an opportunity for the helpers to communicate with a child who is trying to do something that his normal brother may not have the courage to do. With encouragement he soon accepts the offer of a lift into the saddle and gradually the pony is allowed to move forwards. As confidence is gained, races are run and won, the child becomes a cowboy or indian and it is the helpers who are left exhausted!

For the mentally handicapped child living in hospital pony riding may be the most exciting aspect of his weekend. Saturday is no longer Saturday, but 'Horse Day'. It is rare for a child in hospital to have three people helping him at once and, in addition, he is experiencing the movement of the pony, learning how to communicate with him and exploring the world from the saddle.

To prepare for riding a child needs to wear a hat that fits him and a belt around his waist for the helpers to hold. Initially most children sit passively waiting for hat and belt to be found, within a few sessions their excitement and anticipation is such that they rush to find hat and belt for themselves. Sometimes, having had their ride, they slip away to put on another hat and belt thinking they may not be recognised and so get a second ride.

The mentally handicapped child living at home can also be helped in many ways. Katie enjoys her riding lessons with the Group, and her speech and ability to help herself have benefited. She has two brothers, who enjoy life to the full, and in their home there was a sense of injustice that Katie had no outside activity. Her riding lessons redressed the balance and Katie's antics on her pony became the subject of family conversation.

Many of the physically handicapped children who ride with the Group have psychological difficulties that can be helped by pony riding. Life in a wheelchair can be dull, especially when there are few

people to take you out. All too often a handicapped child retreats into a wheelchair world of security and dependency and, as they grow through childhood, they may tire of the efforts of physiotherapists and teachers to help them towards an independent life.

Stephen is 10. He has cerebral palsy and finds it hard to leave his wheel-chair. He has two brothers and one sister. One brother, at the age of two, is already more advanced and able than Stephen who prefers not to walk, relying on those around him to carry him. 'What is the point of reading and writing when life is so dull?'—sums up his attitude to school work. His elder brother is embarrassed by his handicap and it is no wonder that Stephen and his mother feel depressed about the future.

The first step towards improving Stephen's sense of well-being came when he began to have swimming lessons and found a new kind of mobility. But swimming was something that his elder brother could do and he had no chance of competing with him. Pony riding was new to Stephen's family and riding lessons have helped him to regain his lost sense of adventure.

Sally is severely mentally and physically handicapped. Our affectionate name of 'rag doll' is very descriptive. When Sally was first on her pony, she could not look up, but after three or four rides she

managed to lift her head. When some teenage helpers went home with the story of Sally's achievement they amazed their parents with their enthusiasm and desire to help.

Epileptic children, whose lives are often restricted by the fear of an attack, are safe on a pony with their helpers. Within this safety they can experience a sense of adventure and excitement that they may not have known before. Epileptic attacks frequently occur when the brain is not alert and so it is unlikely that a child with reasonably well-controlled epilepsy will have an attack during the exciting experience of riding.

The provision of riding facilities for the handicapped has many aims and fulfils needs that may not be met in any other way. No longer is the handicapped child regarded as a second-class citizen, but is able to do something that many normal children long to emulate. No longer is he in a position of dependence on those around him. He becomes mobile and learns that his actions have an immediate effect on his pony. He has an opportunity of making a friendship with a willing four-footed creature who can carry him to places he would not otherwise reach. While on his pony he can perform antics that are fun as well as being physically and mentally beneficial.

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