

Harmony through horsemanship

Melissa Volpi goes behind the scenes with her local Riding for the Disabled Group



Words by:
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Melissa Volpi is a freelance writer with a love of riding and horses

A STURDY GREY PONY, with a Royal blue headcollar under his bridle, walks down the centre line of an indoor arena towards a marker that reads 'A for Apple.'

The pony is being led by a veterinary nurse who is focused on his behaviour and movement. She keeps an eye on his ears, nostrils, chin and head position to make sure that the pony is happy and relaxed.

Behind her is a teenage girl. She walks in line with the pony's saddle and is called a side walker. Her role is to look after the nine-year-old child, on the autistic spectrum, that sits on the pony's back.

This choreographed team is part of a Monday night therapeutic riding lesson given by Lesley Furnell – an RDA coach, chartered physiotherapist and one of 80 volunteers here at Shiresmill Therapy Riding Centre in West Fife.

Lesley has been involved in RDA for more than 30 years and came to Shiresmill in 2009. The group was first established in 1984, when a handful of volunteers started helping disabled children and adults at a local riding school.

These founding members dreamed of starting up a centre of their own – somewhere with great facilities where they could train horses in a gentle way and help make a difference to the lives of children and adults with learning difficulties and physical problems.

It took 12 years of promoting their idea to secure the funding they needed. In 1996, the group moved to purpose-built premises at Shiresmill – a council-owned plot that is leased to the centre – with their original four ponies and have spent the past 20 years helping it to grow.

The volunteer's host events throughout the year and sponsor pony days to fund the annual running costs, and do all the maintenance work themselves – from looking after and feeding the ponies

everyday to poo picking the fields, fixing fences, levelling out indoor and outdoor arena surfaces and even constructing a 'Sensory Park' (a five-acre adventure playground, which aims to stimulate the five senses, is securely fenced so that children on the autistic spectrum can learn and play safely, either on foot or on horseback).

Distraction-free

As the lesson gets under way, the first thing that you notice is how quiet it is.

There is no radio blaring in the background.

There are no screams or tantrums from the children. There's no chatter coming from the viewing gallery. It's just four horses, four people and nine volunteers working towards harmony in a peaceful setting – the most peaceful that I have ever

witnessed in a riding school environment.

The second thing you notice is the colourful drawings next to each arena marker. Here, you don't just walk down the centre line at C. You walk in by the exotic cat and head towards the huge red gala apple at A.

This group of young children with learning difficulties are not being taught the finer points of dressage in a fun environment though – they are being taught to focus their mind and gain control of their body.

"We teach riding with other goals in mind," Lesley tells me as the group walks clockwise round the arena.

"Autistic children can find it difficult to settle, focus and make decisions. So our job is to help the children find peace and encourage them to use their own initiative."



Gaining confidence

The four children, three girls and one boy who are all under 10, spend a long time focusing on their reins – making sure that they're holding them correctly and that they're the right length.

Once the children seem happy and calm, Lesley asks them to stop their horses and stand up in the stirrups. Immediately, each child lets go of the reins and places a palm on each side of their horses withers. After glancing at their boots to make sure that their feet are centred in the stirrups, each child focuses on their hands and lifts their body out of the saddle.

The children then turn to face Lesley, who is standing in the centre of this arena, with huge smiles on their faces. I can see in this one special moment why professional people, and older teenagers that are in the middle of standard grades, want to make time in their busy schedules to help out as a volunteer here.

The group walk forward again and change the rein at 'B for Bananas.' The leaders, who stand between the pony and the arena wall, swap sides in the centre of the arena before they pass through 'X' and then turn the pony away from them. This little detail gives a huge insight into how things are run at Shiresmill. Here, horse behaviour is taken seriously. The centre has a behaviourist on hand to resolve any training issues.

"A principal part of my role is to develop awareness in our coaches, leaders and side walkers," says Isobel Duncan, a retired equine behaviourist. "I want them to understand how their behaviour, intent, emotion, breathing and energy affects the horses they're working with."

"Our biggest challenge is that our horses receive as consistent handling as possible. To help us fulfil this aim, we give our volunteers knowledge of the world from the horses' perspective. This includes sessions on the basics of horse behaviour and how horses learn from scientific theory.

"Volunteers learn how the horse lives in the world as a 'social and flight'



VITAL LESSONS: Disabled children are taught how to better control their bodies on horseback





ENCOURAGING: Lessons are fun, but calm, at Shiresmill riding centre

animal with senses much more refined than ours. And how our horses are learning all the time in our interactions with them, even when we're not conscious of what we are teaching them."

Isobel is proud of this team – and rightly so. Everyone here wants the horses to be happy and relaxed at all times and it's clear to see that they are working together to make this happen.

As Lesley asks the children to put their arms out to the side like an aeroplane's wings, the leaders make sure that they have their horse's focus and maintain a gentle forward gait so that the children can work on their balance and posture as they swing round to the left and then to the right.

I also notice one of the side walkers reaching out a confidence-giving hand to the child that she is looking after in this lesson – just to make sure that he feels secure in his seat while carrying out these therapeutic exercises.

Before the children dismount, they are asked to name 10 body parts of their horse. I was expecting quick answers with everyone rushing to finish this learning game first – but I was pleasantly surprised when all four children thought through their answers in a calm and methodical manner.

Volunteering

The leaders walk Gypsy, Harry and Dugall around the arena to keep them supple and listening to them before the next group of children arrive, while the side walkers untack and brush Rio the Halflinger, who has finished work for the evening.

I walk with Elizabeth Fraser and Harry – who is a 10-year-old dun coloured Highland pony, known in breeding circles as 'Prince Lochnagar of Moulzie.'

Do you have what it takes to become a volunteer?

If you would like to become a Riding for the Disabled Association volunteer, then visit their official website at rda.org.uk to find a group near you.

The RDA is a very friendly organisation and you don't need any previous equestrian experience to become a volunteer, as all training is given by the organisation before you start. To get started you need to fill in their two-page application form and provide two references, before undergoing a routine police check.

Harry is owned by Lesley and is one of the favourite ponies here at Shiresmill because of his quiet and patient nature. He was bred on the Balmoral Estate and started out his working life training to be a deer pony, before being backed and trained by Rebecca Chalmers and making his name in the show ring – Harry has been junior ridden champion, working hunter champion and dressage champion at the Highland Pony Society breed show.

Harry's education is evident when Elizabeth does walk and halt transitions with him. He's completely focused on her and moves smoothly forward and downwards when asked. Isobel's horse behaviour training is in play here too – as Elizabeth asks Harry to take the first step forward before walking with him at the shoulder. Elizabeth started riding at 10 years old and has been a volunteer here since 2009, helping out on Monday and Thursday evenings and Friday mornings – earning her gold status from Lesley because of her commitment.

"People new to RDA think that it's the volunteers who give, but it's the children that give more," Elizabeth tells me while scratching Harry's neck. "They make us better people." 🐾

Further information

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