

Criteria for Therapeutic Horses

Does your horse have what it takes to be a therapeutic riding mount?

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Horses young and old of all different shapes, sizes, conformations and temperaments are offered to therapeutic riding centers on a daily basis but most are not accepted. Owners might be left wondering why, if they are donating a horse for free, would he not be taken by a nonprofit therapy program. Not every horse has what it takes to enter a therapeutic riding program—including soundness at all gaits, a sweet temperament and low flight response—all of which are required to give clients a safe and physically beneficial riding experience.

Sandy Webster, the program and education director at the J.F. Shea Therapeutic Riding Center in San Juan Capistrano, Calif., explains just what it takes for a horse to be considered and accepted into a therapy program based on the Shea Center's criteria, and how their program works. The Shea Center uses therapeutic horse-related programs to improve the lives of people with disabilities and serves more than 400 clients, from age 2 to 75, each year with about 20 therapy horses.

Webster, who holds a dual-master therapeutic riding instructor status in both the United States and Canada, has seen her fair share of therapy horses during her more than 20-year career in therapeutic riding programs.

To help you decide whether your horse can be that perfect mount for a therapy program, HorseChannel asks Webster some common questions you might have when offering a horse to a therapeutic riding program.

HC: Do therapy horses need to be a certain breed?

Webster: No. Although, many breeds tend to be predisposed to being a therapy horse, such as the Quarter Horse for its quiet temperament, average size, versatility and availability. However, every breed has good qualities and each horse has to be viewed as an individual.

Desired traits include: soundness; three good, clear gaits at the walk, trot and canter; nice temperament; ability to tolerate attention by many people; low flight response; and a height of 14 hands to 16 hands in order to serve children and adult riders.

HC: What training does my horse need to be a therapy horse?

Webster: Well-schooled horses of any discipline, whether English or western, are preferred for therapy. The horses' manners on the ground during grooming, tacking and leading are valued.

Once a horse is deemed a good candidate to be on trial for a therapy program, the horse is exposed to all aspects of the riding classes. They are taught to be led in a manner that encourages the horse to walk beside the leader's shoulder and speed up and slow down in response to the leader's body language and rhythm. The horses on trial must also be exposed to various loud noises, such as music, toys and riders with enthusiasm. In addition, the horses are exposed to various assistive teaching devices, such as batons, rings, toys and flags being either handled by the volunteer or carried by the rider.

All exposure to new and different circumstances must be introduced slowly and with positive reinforcement when the horses react in a calm and accepting way. Any aspects of the riding classes that the horses will be exposed to must be practiced and tested until the horses accept the class environment with a calm, non-fearful demeanor.

HC: Is it OK if my horse is unsound?

Webster: Horses coming into a therapy program should be functionally sound at the walk, trot and canter. However, the horses' work is generally slow and mostly at the walk and trot.

The horses do not need to move as they did in their prime but do need to be able to function with a four-beat walk, two-beat rhythmical trot and three-beat canter.

Horses that are chronically lame do not have the desired movement to create the three-dimensional walk desired for therapy. This is also not fair to the horse.

HC: My horse can be a bit rambunctious; would he still be a good candidate for your program?

Webster: The more rambunctious horses do not tend to settle into a therapeutic riding program because of the slow and steady work expected of them. They can be less predictable in their behaviors and this can be a safety concern in the classes.

HC: Do therapy horses get adequate exercise outside of daily lessons?

Webster: Yes. At our center, there is a schooling program for the horses, which may include long lining, longeing, hacking, and conditioning at the walk, trot and canter. Each horse has its own training program based on making the horse happy, healthy and most versatile for the program.

Each horse is assigned a specific person to be his or her schooling partner and to follow the assigned training program. The riders who school the horses need to have adequate riding skills and knowledge to be of benefit to the horse.

HC: What type of veterinary care does a therapy horse receive?

Webster: The horses at Shea are on a program that addresses their monthly farrier care and annual and monthly veterinary care, including teeth, inoculations, vaccinations, deworming and workups, as needed.

The Shea veterinarian, who donates his time, makes a weekly visit to Shea to look at any horses of question or need to enable them to have the best quality of life.

HC: Can people still come and see their horse if it is donated to the program?

Webster: Yes. We encourage all donors to visit and remain involved with their horse after it becomes a therapy horse. The best scenario is that the donor be able to assist the Equine Director with the horse's schooling program.

HC: What happens to my horse if it is no longer useful to the program?

Webster: If any horse is no longer useful to the program or the program is no longer good for the horse, then the horse is first offered back to the donor.

If the donor is not able to take the horse back, then Shea looks for a retirement home for the horse. Shea is presently looking for retirement homes for several of its long-term therapy horses. The ideal home would be with someone who has some pasture, someone in need of a companion horse, or someone in need of a wonderful horse that they would like to spend time grooming and fussing over.

Further Reading

My experience with equine-assisted therapy
Help horses by volunteering at an equine charity