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Gymnastics on horseback

High above the misty Skåne plain children, horses and nature come together. For the third time Ulrika Stengard-Olsson arranges a camp for disabled children and youth. The children train intensely without noticing the effort.

The sun arises over the tree tops and the quietness on Söderåsens Forsgård is physical. But inside the small barn there is a lot of activity. Six children and young people groom and saddle the three ponies. Albin Svensson and Sandra Ottosson brush the black horse's back, touch the stomach to remove mud and untangle the thick mane. They have to stretch and bend to reach everything. – I like Blakkur the best, it is so comfortable to sit on him, Albin tells us. He has just left his walking frame in front of the box and is helped by Elisabet von Geijer, a physiotherapist.

The 15-year old Sandra Ottosson is used to horses and riding and she brushes the horse evenly as far as she can reach from her wheelchair.

It is time for the first riding tour of the day. Half of the group rides and the rest is trained in theory and saddle care in the barn. Ulrika, one physiotherapist for each child and the parents help Petronella Karlsson, Amanda Olsson and Albin Svensson to mount the horses from a ramp at the riding course.

The day before, Ulrika worked with the children separately, and today they train the new movements

– My muscles are a bit sore in the whole body and especially in the thighs, Albin says. Once I rode at a riding school but then I fell down.

This risk is minimized at the camp. There are at least 2 grown-ups at each horse. The physiotherapist leads the horse and the training and one of the parents or an assistant holds the rider. Ulrika walks back and forth between the horses and instructs each child directly. She shows them each exercise and answers questions.

– The youth wants to know more about the exercises but the young children looks upon them as part of the riding.

The riding lesson might look like a child's play from a distance but every detail is carefully planned to suit the requirement of each separate child.

– The horse is a living treatment bench, Ulrika points out. There are many differences between conventional handicap-riding and hippophysiotherapy. The most important is perhaps that a hippophysiotherapist uses the horse and its influences on the rider as a mean of treatment.

The horse does not have a standard saddle, but a specially made one with hand grip and sometime with a large soft cushion for the back.

After the exercises on the riding course it is time to ride around three small ponds. The water is bright as a mirror and now more senses will be trained. The whole group rides quietly along the forest. The children are at ease, feel the rhythm of the horse and can “just be” in the sunshine.

After the ride the children can tell about the fish that jumped in the water and the acorns that fell down from the trees in the forest. Hippophysiotherapy is about total impression and the healing power of nature is of great importance.

– When the horse walks a three-dimensional movement develops and the result of this movement is that the pelvis of the rider gets the same rotating movements as when he walks upright, Ulrika explains. The movement is transmitted through the body and loosens up the muscles. It is this effect that makes the body receptive to further training. Besides that, the position of the body is almost “standing” on the horseback, with the result that the body relearns and can program the correct movement.

The result is shown not only on the horseback. Ulla Söderlind, a physiotherapist from Simrishamn, noticed the effects on a boy who took part in the camp the week before.

– The boy had difficulty in putting down the heel because the muscles in the calf were tense. When the time came to go home he could straighten the leg. I believe that this type of intense training gives better results than riding once a week for a whole term.

Ulrika Stengard-Olsson's activities are connected with the habilitation of children and youth in Region Skåne. After a successful test week last autumn patients from all over Skåne now come to Ulrika. The initial idea was that the physiotherapist who treated the child should work as an assistant during the camp, but not all physiotherapists have the necessary knowledge in horses and riding. Therefore Viktoria Wennström assists also this week, although there are no children from Lund this time.

– We exchange ideas and can take these ideas home, she points out.

It is not only the physical results that make Ulrika want to further her education and try to find new training methods through her contacts in countries such as Germany, Denmark and Norway. The children's happiness and the work with the horses - that is the greatest satisfaction for Ulrika at the end of the day.

– To cuddle with the horses in peace and quiet is not always possible at the riding schools. The training combined with horse care in rural environment, a meaningful free-time interest.

– **Before the extensive riding tour in the afternoon** Sandra Ottosson tell us about her experiences during the week. She uses her pointing board. Everything was fine. When you ride on Blakkur in the forest you see a lot.

– I have been riding for a long time so I have no sore muscles any more. I would like to have a pony of my own, a white one.

During the week Sandra has primarily trained to sit comfortably and still on the horse.

Other children have massaged the neck of the horse to increase the shoulder stability and strengthen the hand muscles. To bend forward and hug the horse is another popular exercise

After the riding tour in the afternoon the 7-year old Amanda Olsson from Flyinge, the youngest participant in the camp, is tired and smiling she lies down to rest on the neck of the Pony Rasmus.

– It is fun to ride on Rasmus and I never fell down, but my mum did, she says and laughs.

Text and photo: Martina Thalwitzer

Read more about hippophysiotherapist in "Allt om hjälpmedel 7/02

More info's:

www.irt.just.nu

soderasens.forsgard@home.se

For information about the education to hippophysiotherapist in Denmark:

Dansk Handikappidrottsförbund, phone +45 43 26 26 26

or Helen Ravnbo, phone +45 5671 41 43 ravnbo@get2net.dk