

under the

Horses Become Disabled Students' Best Friends

BY TERRY POPE

Horses are not cute and cuddly like kittens or puppies—kids can't sneak them inside without someone in the house finding out.

However, horses and ponies are becoming best friends with about 60 Brunswick County developmentally handicapped students who are involved in the adapted horseback riding program that began last Tuesday morning in Bolivia.

Sponsored by the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department and the Brunswick County Community Schools program, the four-week course stresses hippotherapy, a therapeutic method of using horses to help students overcome their own physical disabilities.

Now in its third year, the adapted horseback program will introduce new lessons within a few weeks that concentrate on improving posture for students who have difficulty in motor skills, said Tina Pritchard, special events coordinator with the Brunswick County Parks and Recreation Department.

Students will learn to improve their posture while riding on horseback, or for the smaller children, while riding on ponies. A horse's rhythmical movements are the same natural movements that a human pelvis should make, so horseback riding can improve relaxation, help strengthen specific muscles and improve posture, Ms. Pritchard said.

For some students, allowing a horse's legs to replace their own can be a moment of success, no matter how developmentally disabled the child may be. The rider may feel special for participating in an activity that many able-bodied persons often find difficult. Such lessons are the key to hippotherapy, according to a study prepared by Dr. Gertrude Freeman, professor of physical therapy at the University of Texas.

"The ultimate goal, at the end of the four weeks," Ms. Pritchard said, "is for the children to be able to ride by themselves, without someone leading the horse. It depends on how well they progress."

Classes from six schools, Union Primary, Southport Elementary, Waccamaw Elementary, Leland Middle, South Brunswick Middle and Bolivia Elementary, participate in the program three days a week for two hours each day at the Unicorn Stables on Midway Road in Bolivia. Stable manager Nina Quattlebaum has introduced her therapeutic horses and ponies for three years to the students who are always eager to return.

The students are first taught not to be afraid of Jack, Trigger, Copper, Fuller and the other horses by learning to groom and care for them. Students learn about personal hygiene and the need for self-care through the grooming techniques.

Some students who took the course last year brought carrots and apples to feed their friends last week. Such positive interaction allows the children to feel warmth and acceptance by the animal, Dr. Freeman's study states.

"Positioned high on a horse without crutches or wheelchairs," the study states, "disabled children have the opportunity to interact with their peers on an equal level. Hippotherapy provides this opportunity, and physical therapists play a central role in the achievement of its goals."



WACCAMAW ELEMENTARY student Jamie Simmons brushes Fuller, one of the horses used in the adapted horseback program. Students learn about grooming

and personal hygiene while caring for the horses and ponies.

STAFF PHOTOS BY TERRY POPE



SHANNON KING rides Jack while Melissa Norris walks the pony. The Waccamaw Elementary students will continue the class for four weeks.

Betsy Simpson, physical therapist with the schools, oversees each child's involvement in the program and focuses on what activities each child should be performing. For example, if students have difficulty moving their left arms, then exercises are introduced requiring left arm movements, such as grooming the horse. That way, the students subliminally learn to improve their motor skills while enjoying the activity.

"We slow it down and go one brush at a time," Ms. Pritchard said. "Students must also walk the horse before they ride. The reason we do that is, if they're going to be jumpy walking the horse, then they are also going to be jumpy riding the horse."

If a student can not mount a horse on his own, then he doesn't ride, Ms. Pritchard said. It's all a part of teaching students to help themselves.

"It's so important that they do it themselves and that they get off the horse by themselves," she added. "They're really learning a lot out there, such as learning to tell their left from their right. The school system shouldn't think that they're just out there riding

horses."

Some groups have requested that horseback riding be added to the county's Special Olympics program. All of the children that are in the adapted horseback program also participate in the Special Olympics, which are held today (Thursday) at South Brunswick High School at 9:45 a.m.

Approximately \$700 each year is budgeted for the adaptive horseback program that began three years ago as a pilot program for the county with intentions of making it a part of the students' curriculum. In the first year, only three schools participated.

Although more students are involved in the program this year, the number of volunteers has declined, Ms. Pritchard said. The program still needs volunteers to help with the students from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. each Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

"I would encourage volunteers to come out," Ms. Pritchard added, "even if they can only help out for a few hours each week. We always need more volunteers."

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