Staying in the saddle is just the beginning

Pennsylvania therapeutic riding nonprofit helps riders with special needs gain confidence

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Married 53 years, Ben and Shirley Nolt have been riding and working with horses since their teens. The couple, who founded Capital Area Therapeutic Riding Association (CATRA) in 1985, are leaders in equine and animal therapy and therapeutic riding in central Pennsylvania. They say the only thing they love more than horses is family.

The Nolts, with a group CATRA volunteers and riders, brought their American miniature horses, all 40 inches or less in height, to the Pennsylvania Farm Show last month for two "Extravaganza" performances as they have done for two decades. Show visitors marveled at the miniature horses, their young riders and volunteers who run them through their paces.

The non-profit has been teaching children and adults to ride for nearly 40 years from its 10-acre Grantville, Pennsylvania, farm. Their program includes 20 lesson horses in the riding program as well as a string of 25 miniature horses who are the size of many CATRA's young students and have become more and more important to their programs.

CATRA offers a variety of opportunities for individuals with special needs starting with a weekly learn-to-ride program throughout the year with students coming from the surrounding counties. They also offer internships for individuals interested in working in the therapeutic riding industry, an alternative break experience for college students, special programs for children including a summer day camp, a Paws N'Read program where students read to CATRA animals, as well as individualized programs for students with the miniature horses.

Photo by Art Petrosemolo

CATRA students Piper, Bella, and Missy lead "Tuffi," "Lil Patches," and "Cotton Candy" around the ring at the Pennsylvania Farm Show recently.

Photo courtesy of CATRA

CATRA's founders Shirley and Ben Nolt with their 4-year-old grandson, Hugo, who is learning to ride a miniature horse.

CATRA also trains volunteers to care for and work with horses and assist with lessons. The staff includes the Nolts, two full-time employees and nearly 30 volunteers on-site daily.

There are hundreds of therapeutic riding centers across the country teaching recreational riding adapted to individuals with disabilities. These programs are taught by certified therapeutic riding instructors supported by volunteers.

"It's more than just learning how to stay on a horse," says Ben, CATRA's president. "It's really about helping riders address and overcome the challenges they face daily as they gain confidence in their abilities to ride and bond with our special horses."

Back to the Greeks

Therapeutic-type riding is mentioned in ancient Greek literature but the modern era of equine therapy dates to the mid-1940s in Scandinavia. By the 1960s, therapeutic riding began to be viewed as an adjunct to physical therapy in Europe and was called "hippotherapy." In 1969, the North American Riding for Handicapped Association (NARHA) was established in the United States to address the needs of riders with physical challenges and has more than 600 centers.

Shirley Nolt is the lead instructor at CATRA and has been a riding instructor since her college days when she met Ben. The spark to open CATRA happened in the early 1980s when, as a roving riding instructor in central Pennsylvania, Shirley had a request from a neighbor to teach their preteen daughter with a physical disability how to ride their backyard pony.

The relationship Shirley built with the teen and her mother ultimately led to the Nolts purchasing their farm and opening a small therapeutic riding program with two horses and four riders. The mother and daughter are still active in CATRA programs and chair one of the group's fundraising efforts each year.

CATRA has both full-size and miniatures horses to work with students and riders who all have medical prescriptions for therapeutic riding or equine therapy as part of their physical therapy.

"We always had a couple of miniature animals — horses, donkeys and mules — but about five years ago began to add additional miniatures who we found to be non-threatening and supportive for children who were about their size. We kept adding horses to our string which now numbers 25," Nolt said.

Age is no matter

And there's a lot more going on at CATRA than learning to stay on a horse, he said. Riders address problem solving, handling frustration, team building, self-esteem, communication and leadership issues among others in weekly sessions with instructors and volunteers, all working toward goals set by their doctors and therapists, he said.

Riding at CATRA goes on year-round in three outdoor and two indoor arenas and some 100 riders take part in programs each week, 80% of them children.

CATRA has had a rider as young as eight months and as old as 93. Its programs are supported by general donations from friends and supporters, grants, sponsorships, gifts, special event programs and lesson fees.

Nolt has spent his career working in the equine industry, including 12 years with the Penn State Extension 4-H programs and another 12 years as the executive secretary of the Pennsylvania State Horse Racing Commission.

He likens equine therapy to baking a cake. "Each cake has lots of ingredients as we do in equine therapy, and our mix includes horses, students, and instructors. And after a thorough evaluation by professional staff, a program is devised for each rider to meet the physical and emotional goals of that individual. Our horses really are really the heart of the program."

To learn about CATRA and its programs, visit their website at: catra.net