

## Which Horse is Good for Therapeutic Riding?

In the therapeutic riding industry, the horse either makes or breaks a riding center. It takes a special quality horse to be awarded the title of "Therapy Horse." First and foremost is temperament – a pleasant, easy-going, quiet attitude is a must. A therapeutic facility does not have the time to teach every horse how to have a good temperament. That would be taking away from the clients that rely on a weekly, sometime twice a week, riding lesson.

Consider this....

If your vehicle had 250,000 miles on it, two broken windows, and no brakes, would you donate it to the neighborhood nursing home to use for transporting clients?

Many people who have horses that are "worn out" consider donating them to a therapeutic equine center. After all, don't those therapy horses just have to walk slowly and occasionally trot slowly, around a flat arena, and they get lots of attention? It's a perfect way to spend their retirement years!

Not really so perfect.

A therapy horse can be asked to give up to three hours of lessons per day, five days per week. In any given one hour lesson a therapy horse may work at a fast-paced walk or a consistent trot. A few horses are even asked to canter for a portion of their lessons and most must canter for their conditioning program.

Therapy horses must tolerate being crowded by groups of people (a rider, two side-walkers, a leader and the instructor). Riders who are unsteady many inadvertently pull on the reins, makes lots of noise and action while on the horse. The horse will also be groomed several times a day with riders and volunteers touching and leaning all over them. Therapy horses may carry riders who are unable to mount from the ground so they use a mounting ramp. This process entails fitting the horse tightly between two stationary objects (the mounting ramp & mounting block or barrel) with an unstable rider and 2-3 people around to assist. Most important to the riders, therapy horses are asked to play various games such as basketball, moving Velcro objects around (makes a strange noise), trail courses and other imaginative ideas. All these listed activities can be frightening to a horse that is not desensitized properly.

Therapeutic equine centers match each of their participants to the therapy horse that best fits their lesson needs. Each of these horses has their own personalities, movements and strengths. Centers utilize many different breeds of horses in their programs: Arabian, Quarter Horse, Halflinger, Shetland, Thoroughbred, TN Walking Horse (and other gaited breeds), Belgian, Percheron, Appaloosa, Miniature horses, and even Mules! Centers use the movement of the horse as a teaching tool, so it is imperative that horses must be serviceably sound. This is important because the movement of the horse's walk is the closest movement to mimicking the natural hip motion of a person. Therefore a person who has been confined to a wheelchair, uses a walker, braces, or has never walked before, not only receives the exercise benefits from the horse but can gain fulfillment of a natural human's stride.

The horse's gait is very important to consider when pairing with a rider. A rider who needs more stimulation will benefit most from a horse with a choppy stride (like a Quarter Horse). Riders who are tense or prone to seizures benefit most from a smooth gaited horse (like an Arabian or TN Walker).

Even the horse's frame has to be taken into consideration. Narrow horses are good for riders who cannot separate their legs very far. A wide-based horse is good for riders who need a larger base for balance.

While we greatly appreciate all horses that are offered for donation, horses that are too old or too young, too spoiled or spooky, or too fast or slow may not be a good match for most therapeutic equine programs. The **ideal** therapy horse (although exceptions to these guidelines are considered by our program) may be but not limited to:

- Between 6 and 25 years old
- Gelding or mare (no stallions or pregnant mares)
- 13 to 16 hands (although we may utilize smaller ponies and larger horses based on the needs of our clientele)
- Most important: gentle, quiet, and easy-going
- Serviceably sound
- Well-trained – we have found that horses with backgrounds in areas like polo, pony club, 4-H, dressage, rodeo, western pleasure, hunter, and so on are usually very well suited to life as a therapy horse. Our center is limited on time and resources. Due to this we are only able to provide them with training in specific therapeutic areas like the mounting ramp, various toys and games, and getting used to side walkers walking beside them during a lesson.

All horses must have a current negative Coggins test and be up to date on all vaccinations. Most centers cannot accept horses that have chronic health issues such as hock problems, back pain, loss of vision/hearing, founder, etc. as it is too much of a financial burden for the non-profit center.

Many centers have well-defined therapeutic training programs that they put all potential horses through. If the horse performs successfully then they are accepted into the program and given a loving, working environment to call home. Those that are not suited for therapeutic programs are returned to their gracious owners.

We are always looking for "Therapy Horse" donations. If you have a trustworthy companion that you think would qualify as a "Therapy Horse" please fill out the Equine Profile – we would love to come out and meet your horse!