

# Therapy on horseback: Naples Equestrian Challenge offers riding for the developmentally disabled

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POSTED: 10:53 AM, Mar 18, 2015

Helping developmentally disabled kids experience the thrill of riding horses is a labor of love. It's also labor-intensive — each rider requires three volunteer helpers, one to lead the horse, and one walking along on either side.

So the Naples Equestrian Challenge, the group whose mission it is to provide the benefits of riding for those with disabilities, depends greatly on their pool of volunteers. It was "all hands on deck," or all hands in the arena, this past weekend, when NEC held their annual Horse Show, a gymkhana where the riders could win trophies for their riding.

Actually, every rider went home with a trophy; the events are not competitive, and the circuits around the covered arena at the NEC stables in North Naples are at a gentle, easy pace. But that doesn't lessen the excitement of sitting atop a massive animal, and having it carry you around and around.

While most of the riders are young, the age range is wide — the youngest is 2, and NEC has one rider aged 87. They have an equally wide range of disabilities, from autism, to cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, and for one young man in a gaudy tie-dyed shirt, tuberous sclerosis.

"This is kind of his thing," said Kelly Marie Heslin, mother of "almost 12" year-old Jack Heslin, the tie-dyed rider. "He loves coming here. He couldn't walk or talk, and this has been a great help with his balance and speech."

Four at a time, the riders are placed carefully in the saddles, the stirrups adjusted, and head off around the open-air, covered arena just off Pine Ridge Road. They circle the area, weave around the poles for a slalom component, and with varying degrees of assistance, place a large ring over a pole to work on manual dexterity.

With the side minders watching intently, each equestrian gets the chance to trot down the center of the ring, and go over what is called the jump — a post placed about six inches from the ground, over which the horses step gingerly.

With 145 special needs riders each week, and all of them expected over the two days of the Horse Show, the volunteers have to work, well, like horses, giving everyone the chance to ride and keeping them safe. The horses, eight of them, work long hours as well. This year for the show, the theme was Disney, and posters of Disney characters adorned the ring, while the horses had painted decorations and slogans on them, and their tails braided into fancy plaits.

Picket, or "Pick-a-Spot," a Dalmatian-spotted white and black pony a size or two smaller than the other horses, and a favorite of the riders, had an apple painted on her neck and another on the rump, and a bright red ribbon woven into her tail. Banjo, a brown and white warmblood, sported the slogan "Once upon a time."

The horses are carefully vetted for NEC, given a 60-day trial period to ensure they have the demeanor and "work ethic" to give their clients the experience the organization is looking for, said volunteer and program coordinator Layne Waltbillig.

Having grown from a couple of horses to more than 25 in a supporter's backyard, NEC has now reached capacity at their current facility. The group is conducting a "barn raising" capital campaign to build an expanded equine therapy center adjacent to the current stable on Ridge Drive. Thanks to a \$520,000 block grant from Collier Development, they have acquired the land, but are in the middle of a quest to raise approximately \$5 million to cover construction and an endowment for future needs.

Naples Equestrian Challenge has a total of 450 volunteers, but more are always needed. To help, donate or learn more, visit their website at [www.NaplesEquestrianChallenge.org](http://www.NaplesEquestrianChallenge.org).

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