

Festina Lente's therapeutic riding sessions are intended to help a wide range of young people.

changing lives

Ireland now has its first therapeutic riding coaching course. NIAMH O'REILLY finds out how it is teaching the teachers to help the disabled and those socially and economically excluded.

From the pages and screens of popular culture like *The Horse Whisperer* to the more recent production of *War Horse*, we've been told that the bond between human and horse can be a powerful thing. It has the ability to heal scars, both emotional and physical, it can turn lives around and delve into the hard-reached worlds of autism and other conditions which the conventional world cannot penetrate.

Yet some still see the application of therapeutic riding as nothing more than a noble hobby involving special-needs children floundering around on sleepy, woolly ponies. However, detractors had better sit up and take note because the practice of working with equines for therapeutic means, both mentally and physically, is gaining strength and producing far-reaching results for those whose lives have been changed by it.

The need is huge from coaches and those with equestrian experience, as is the demand from people with disabilities for therapeutic riding.

Ireland now has its first certified therapeutic riding coaching course. Festina Lente, in Bray, Co Wicklow, could be seen as something of a haven for the marginalised. Set up in 1988 by Mary Rachel Brophy, it aims to create an environment where people with disabilities can be trained vocationally in equestrianism and those who are the victims of social or economic exclusion can learn and gain employment opportunities through equine-assisted learning programmes.

It also works with community groups to support activities that are quality-of-life-enhancing such as Bray Cancer Support Group and the Carers Association.

The pilot, 12-month programme for the coaching course has been a huge success, with the first year's crop of students due to graduate later this year. The list for a second course is already filling up fast.

"We are already taking names for next year," says Jill Carey, CEO of Festina Lente. "It's been a fantastic success, with a super balance between horse welfare considerations and quality training on disability uses."

Jill says she initially decided to take up a position with Festina Lente for just one year as part of an overall career plan but has now been there for 10 years. "The scope was so varied and untapped, and we kept developing the services," she explains.

For Jill, this course and its success has been the culmination of lots of hard work, although, modestly, she will not admit how instrumental she was in its conception.

"I am merely a conduit," she insists. "The need is huge from coaches and those with equestrian experience, as is the demand from people with disabilities for therapeutic riding. Horse Sport Ireland successfully negotiated the LEADER [grant aid] Programme to be extended to

Shelly Berry joins the therapeutic riding coaching course in an attempt to use horses in a positive way.



Jill Carey judges a competition at Festina Lente, and inset, achievement is rewarded, but the consequences of therapeutic riding sessions can go further than winning rosettes.

equestrianism. I merely joined the dots. Fingal Partnership has also been very supportive of this pilot programme."

The course, accredited by FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council), offers students the chance to engage in equine-based learning techniques, together with a knowledge of disability, to design and develop learning and therapeutic interventions for people with special needs.

The wide variety of topics covered includes human and equine learning, understanding disability, an appreciation of therapeutic riding and its impact, designing therapeutic riding sessions and teaching and evaluating them.

However, the participants need to be more than just good students – requiring something a little extra-special to get the best out of the course. "They need

a real passion to bring the wonder of horses to people in order to enhance their physical, psychological and psycho-social wellbeing," says Jill.

Two such people who decided to take on the challenge were Claire McDonald and Shelly Berry. Both have been riding since childhood and were already interested in the field of therapeutic riding and the benefits for children and adults with special needs.

Shelly, from Co Wexford, was drawn to the course after becoming "disillusioned with the way horses were used as a 'tool' in the industry". After doing some research on how horses could be used in a more positive way for both horse and handler, she came across Festina Lente.

"I was lucky enough to be involved in their equine-assisted learning programme for a few months and, from this experience, I knew that this was the way forward for both myself and my horses," says Shelly.



'Students need a real passion to bring the wonder of horses to people in order to enhance their physical, psychological and psycho-social wellbeing.'



"I started Rag Tree Equine Assisted Learning, in Kilmuckridge, to offer an equine-assisted learning service in Wexford. I had been thinking of incorporating therapeutic riding into the range of programmes we offer, so, when I heard that Festina Lente were offering a training programme, I applied instantly."

Similarly, Claire, who works with people with intellectual disabilities, had attended some of Festina Lente's conferences. "I heard Jill Carey speak about the course at a conference and I applied to do this course," she recalls. "When I researched therapeutic riding, I was really inspired by all the feedback from the people who have benefited from it."

Both women have found the course a real joy, bouncing off others who have the same interests and swapping new ideas. However, it has also been a real eye-opener to the depths of just how emotionally sensitive and potentially healing the horses can be and has given the students a new outlook on their relationships with horses from the point of view of coaching.

"It has forced me to re-think aspects of my previous learning and given me a more holistic interpretation of the horse-



Four-year-old Rachel Doak enjoys a training session at Festina Lente.

human partnership," says Shelly. "I have also become aware of my own body language and the effects of this on the horse, and trying to change these behaviours that I have used for years into behaviours more sensitive to the needs of the horse."

Claire, too, has had to take on board new approaches to her relationships with horses in terms of being a therapeutic riding coaching. "I need to be able to pick up on the signals that the horse is sending out," she says. "The course is great at teaching us how to do this."

"We need to be very perceptive, both to the person and to the horse. We have to trust our intuition and be calm because I think that horses have the ability to read our body language and our moods."

The debate on just how perceptive horses can be is one that is divisive, but Jill is convinced that horses' ability to perceive us as people and help us accordingly is very much based on fact.

From a more conventional therapeutic point of view, she

says: "The walk of the equine appears to mirror the walk of a person, hence providing transfer movement patterns to the rider's lower spine and pelvic regions."

"For example, a large equine transfers 100 multi-dimensional swinging motions in the walk to the rider each minute. By being astride the equine, with the therapist or coach giving specific instructions, the equine naturally helps to increase body strength, control and balance."

"As the equine walks, the rider makes subtle adjustments to his or her body position in order to try and maintain stability. It is this change that the rider has to make when an equine walks that is the base of hippotherapy and therapeutic riding."

Indeed, apart from the potential mental or psycho-social improvement, the positive physical benefits that can be gained from therapeutic riding are enormous.

"Physiotherapists continuously refer children as young as two for TR sessions," explains Jill. "We often have referrals from the National Rehabilitation Hospital for

A STUDENT ON THE COACHING COURSE DEMONSTRATES HOW THE HUMAN SKELETON MOVES WHILE ON HORSEBACK.



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people who have been involved with accidents resulting in spinal injury."

As for the other benefits, Jill says that, although there have been few specific studies into the psycho-social effects of equine-mounted activities, "some studies to date highlight improvements in the areas of improved self-confidence, self-esteem, self-concept and increased self-efficacy and motivation, as well as improvements in the areas of communication skills, problem-solving, decision-making and personal development, and improved social functioning in young people with autism".

Apart from studies, through her 10 years in Festina Lente, Jill has seen the positive effects with her own eyes. "I do believe that, for many of our riders with a disability, their sole intention is to connect in some way with the horse and therefore they have no other agenda, and I believe the horses sense this innocence and honesty," she explains.

"The qualities of horses are extremely beneficial to many people and you can apply a number of theoretical frameworks as to why this may be so. But their size, their willingness to engage with people, their natural curiosity and willingness to forgive small mistakes makes them wonderful learning partners for everybody."

But what about the horses involved in therapeutic riding sessions? Some would claim it's unfair to put them in a situation where they might be put under the extra stress and pressure associated with a person or child with special needs.

However, Jill is quick to point out that her experience shows this to be a completely false notion. "Horse welfare is a critical and integral part of this programme," she says. "Assuming that you have appropriate training and continuously school your horse, have correct roller and pads, trained side walkers and leaders and, of course, therapeutic riding coaches, yes, it is fair. In fact, my experience is that horses behave somewhat differently in this situation, almost quieter."

Although she agrees that the change in behaviours might be down to the quality of staff and volunteers involved, Jill is keen to point out that the horses seem to have an extra sense and behave accordingly.

'It has forced me to re-think aspects of my previous learning and given me a more holistic interpretation of the horse-human partnership.'



The connection between horses and people is at the root of Festina Lente's work

"Horses are horses and, if something very unpredictable happens, yes, of course, like any horse in any situation that's sudden or unexpected, he will get scared. However, the horses selected for this work will be those that are very tolerant and can quickly differentiate between something unusual and something to be scared of. Stressed out?"

With a smile, she adds: "High-energy, volatile people stress horses, but you don't need to enter the world of disability to find these."

Thankfully, Jill's calm, collected approach is something that is instilled in the students, which means the likelihood of any horse used in therapeutic riding being stressed out will be very low.

Indeed, Shelly Berry is all too aware of how she will have to balance the needs of the rider with the needs of the horse. "Horses have an unbelievable sense to mirror emotion and react to what is in front of them, reading us through our intentions and feelings," she says.

"Horses react differently to different people and, in different situations, it is our responsibility and that of leaders and side-walkers to maintain a structured and reliable situation for the horse and rider.

"Our handling and management, and an awareness of the horses used and signs of

stress, are crucial to the overall balance and ultimate success of the session."

Many people, both students and riders, have thrived on the welcoming and positive atmosphere offered by Festina Lente for more than 20 years and it seems the success of programmes such as the therapeutic riding coaching course is set to make sure it carries on for at least another 20 years.

So crucial is the work done in Festina Lente that it will be making six presentations at the Horses in Education and Therapy International Conference in Athens next month.

However, for Jill, it's the amazing connection she sees every day between the horses and people that is the really extraordinary thing. "I do remember a comment made by a young boy of 10 years whose living circumstances were quite chaotic," she says. "His involvement with us probably represented the most stable and nurturing experience he had had for a while.

"We had brought some ponies down to the field after an equine-assisted learning session. As we walked back, I asked him if he ever thought about the time he spent with the horses. He nodded and said, 'Yes, last thing before I go to sleep at night.' For me, he probably reflects how many young people feel about their time at Festina Lente with the horses."

Festina Lente CEO Jill Carey says the pilot therapeutic riding coaching course is proving an overwhelming success.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE THERAPEUTIC RIDING COACHING COURSE OR ANY OTHER PROGRAMMES OFFERED AT FESTINALENTE, LOG ON TO WWW.FESTINALENTE.IE.



riders invited to road safety days

RIDERS are being invited to take part in a series of British Horse Society Riding & Road Safety Days at the College of West Anglia, Milton, Cambridgeshire. The one-day-only, intensive courses are scheduled for 4 April, 25 July, 1 and 22 August, and 26 October.

The days, which are supported by Barnsby Saddlery, Equine Management and Training, and Dengie Horse Feeds, will run from 8.30am to 5.30pm, with a buffet lunch and all course material included.

Members of the Dengie team will give a presentation on equine nutrition. Everyone who takes up their offer of personalised dietary advice and the chance to have their horse weighed on the Dengie weighbridge will receive a £5 feed voucher to spend on a recommended Dengie product. All other attendees will receive a Dengie goody bag containing a feed sample, pen and product literature.

The courses are open to riders aged 12 and over – whether they own a horse or not. They cost £89 for those bringing their own horses or ponies, or £99 for riders wishing to hire one.

"I love hacking and I would urge everyone who rides a horse on the road to attend one of these courses," said BHS riding and road safety trainer Chloe Giles.

For further information about the BHS Riding & Road Safety Days, email Chloe at gileschloe@gmail.com.

horsetalk

warm welcome home for saxon

THERE was a warm welcome home when Redwings Horse Sanctuary returned Saxon, a magnificent Suffolk Punch, to his birthplace – and his mum – at Somerleyton Estate after a 15-year absence.

Saxon had originally left Somerleyton after being sold as a two-year-old. However, he was recently signed over to the RSPCA after a struggling stud farm admitted it could no longer cope with the demands of 18hh Saxon and his wellbeing was suffering as a result.

The horse's blood records were traced back to Somerleyton and the RSPCA contacted the Suffolk stately home to see whether it could add another Suffolk Punch to its Fritton stables – and it agreed.

The RSPCA then contacted Redwings to reunite the two because the Norfolk-based charity regularly deals with the transit of large horses. Redwings welfare officer Julie Harding and vet Roxane Kirton set off in their transporter at 3am for a 12-hour round trip to bring him back to Suffolk.

allerton adds an advanced class

ALLERTON Park Horse Trials is adding an Advanced class to its autumn event, to be held on the weekend of 15 to 16 September.

"We are so pleased to be moving to the next level," said event organiser Lady Mowbray. "We feel that we have the right team in place to provide an Advanced class that will be exciting to competitors and spectators alike."

Work has already started on the new course, which will be 3.25k long and include 33

Somerleyton estate manager Edward Knowles said that the estate had failed in efforts to acquire Saxon two years ago – and he was delighted finally to welcome him back.

"He's a big lad – magnificent," said Somerley estate manager Edward Knowles. "Horses have fantastic memories and, once he was off the Redwings transport, he appeared relaxed and familiar with his new surroundings.

"Saxon will remain at our Fritton stables while he settles in. He will then be reunited with his mother at Somerleyton in the spring."

In addition the current BEI00, Novice and Intermediate courses are being improved, which includes a remodelling of the island water complex.

The addition of a further 25 acres of pasture to the site will also enable upgrading of the dressage arenas, collecting rings and parking areas.



Somerleyton estate manager Edward Knowles welcomes Saxon back to his original home.