

### Horse Power: a force for good

Adapted from an article by **Jim White**

- 1 Just five minutes into a visit to the South Bucks *Riding for the Disabled* (RDA) facility near Gerrard's Cross and Di Redfern spots a familiar response in her visitor. "You're smiling," she says to me. "That's the thing about this place: the moment you walk in, you can't help smiling." We are standing in the viewing gallery watching half a dozen children walk slowly around the indoor equestrian centre atop a bunch of horses. At the end of their slow circle around the barn, the young equestrians are being encouraged to take a letter from a pole and post it in a box a bit farther round the course. And the thing that would make anyone smile is the way their faces light up when they manage to complete their delivery from a horse. The 27 is palpable.
- 2 One former South Bucks RDA regular was Sophie Christiansen, who won three Paralympic gold medals in August 2012, enrapturing the 10,000-strong crowd with her exquisite riding skills. Born two months premature, she contracted cerebral palsy as a baby. Being ferociously bright (the holder of a master's degree in maths, she is about to start an internship at Goldman Sachs) and ferociously competitive, as a child she found her physical condition endlessly 28.
- 3 The moment she climbed on top of a horse, however, she felt as if she had come home. "Horses gave me a freedom I didn't get in my day-to-day life because of my disability," she says. "A horse is an amazing leveller. They don't notice if I'm disabled, they notice only if I can communicate with them. Horses can sense the kind of person you are, they don't bother what kind of physique you have. I've fallen off plenty of times," says Sophie. "We are working with what are essentially 30 animals that weigh half a ton. You do not know how they will behave when something out of the ordinary happens. But I trust them enough to know nothing too dramatic will happen."
- 4 "The RDA is about accomplishing something," says Sophie. "That doesn't have to be a gold medal. It could be sitting up straight. Or just being able to communicate with another living thing. There is no doubt that riding a horse does something very special for a child with disabilities," says Di, who has been running the South Bucks RDA for nearly half a century. "If you're in a wheelchair, you spend your life looking up at the world. In the saddle, you're looking down. You'd be amazed at what that does for a child's confidence."



5        Watching the youngsters slowly circle the barn, the most 31 thing is the number of helpers. In addition to the instructor, there is at least one volunteer walking alongside each horse, some of the children are so frail they need three volunteers to walk alongside the horse. “The reason Team GB is so good at Paralympic dressage – we haven’t lost a gold medal since the sport was introduced to the Games – is because of the RDA and its volunteers,” says Sophie. “They made me what I am and I’ll be forever grateful.” As for those volunteers, there is one thing guaranteed about taking part in an RDA session: as Di Redfern long ago recognised, you always end up with a smile on your face.

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