

# Overcoming obstacles

2011-04-07 / Lifestyles



High Hurdles Therapeutic Riding helps individuals reach full potential  
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Reporter



Lynn Kelly, fund development coordinator for High Hurdles, helps instructor Erin Brauen mount the horse "Babe" with the help of the Surehands Lift and Judy Feine (back to camera), the program's equine services supervisor. Photos by Jim Smerecak. Purchase color photos at [www.BeeNews.com](http://www.BeeNews.com) Therapeutic riding offers cognitively, emotionally and physically challenged individuals a unique opportunity for growth and development.

High Hurdles Therapeutic Riding, a division of Suburban Adult Services Inc., is located at 13339 Route 39 in Sardinia. It offers therapeutic riding for individuals age 3 and up. Sessions are offered from March through mid-November, Monday through Friday and on Saturday. The sessions are six weeks long with one session per week. There are typically four students per class.

The High Hurdles Therapeutic Riding Program was developed in 1997 by a committee of parents, educators and professionals who were interested in providing a therapeutic riding experience for children with developmental disabilities. The program has expanded throughout the years and currently serves more than 200 riders from ages 3 to 83.



Brandy, front, and Carla brush "Crickett" as part of therapy and horse care at High Hurdles. The mission of the High Hurdles program is to provide an opportunity for growth, development and other positive changes for individuals with special needs and to foster the community's awareness, appreciation, participation and donor involvement through the horse-human bond.

Through learning to care for horses and mastering riding skills and other horse-related activities, therapeutic horsemanship enables individuals to improve posture, balance and stamina; increase body and environmental awareness; improve concentration, speech and problem-solving skills; and enhance self-esteem and social confidence.

"It creates success and independence," said Judy Feine, equine services supervisor for High Hurdles.

Therapeutic riding promotes sensory awareness because the barn setting may be an entirely new environment for the individual. The sights and smells of the barn and the sensation of riding and feeling the horse's motion are just some of the experiences that provide the optimal sensory experience.

Physical development is another benefit of therapeutic riding. The motion of the horse at a walk moves the rider's pelvis in almost the same manner as it moves during a normal human walk, thus contributing to improved posture and gait. Strength, endurance and flexibility are increased through barn management and grooming as well as through riding.

Therapeutic riding also provides an ideal setting for cognitive development. Directionality, sequencing, increased vocabulary and increased attention span are just a few of the areas that can be addressed through the pursuit of horsemanship.

Learning new skills and overcoming obstacles through a series of successes builds self-esteem and helps promote emotional development. The horse is a teacher of natural consequences, as it responds to the rider's cues without judgment. Above all, the horse offers unconditional affection.

Using a "team" approach of riders, mounts, volunteers and instructor, the therapeutic riding lesson encourages bonds of friendship and mutual respect, which helps to foster social development. An appropriate competitive spirit is also fostered through lesson games and involvement in organized events such as Special Olympics and open competition.

"It's all about using the horse to maximize the person's potential," Feine said.

Before riding, participants must have completed registration forms and provide a physician's permission and a medical report. Riders with Down syndrome must also have a negative X-ray for atlantoaxial instability.

High Hurdles is also home to a "surehands lift," which allows riders to be safely lifted from a wheelchair and placed on a horse. The lift was installed last summer, and Feine said High Hurdles has the only one that she knows of in Western New York. Feine said the lift allows High Hurdles to accommodate individuals who might otherwise have been told they couldn't ride.

"That's tragic," she said. "We don't have to say that anymore."

As a Special Olympics training center, High Hurdles also provides riders with the ability to train and compete within the Special Olympics program.

High Hurdles also offers specialized programming addressing behavioral, emotional and educational needs. Part of this program is on-horse and part off-horse.

Other services include structured field trips and speaking engagements.

Feine said High Hurdles is in need of volunteers for 2011. Classes are held mornings, afternoons and weekends, with a particular need for volunteers during the daytime classes.

Prospective volunteers must be at least 14 years old and interested in assisting riders with special needs. Upon acceptance and completion of an orientation class, volunteers work with the instructors and horses to help riders learn horsemanship skills and achieve personal growth and development. Volunteers are asked to assist in one class per week for one or more six-week session.

Those interested in finding out more information about therapeutic riding or volunteering can contact Feine at 496-5551 or by e-mail at [hhurdles@sasinc.org](mailto:hhurdles@sasinc.org). e-mail: [kkotz@beenews.com](mailto:kkotz@beenews.com)