

Equine Assisted Activities and Therapy Without Borders

An International Perspective

By Joann Benjamin PT, HPCS, and Octavia Brown, Ed M

There is no exact date when and where horses began helping people with disabilities. But horses and humans are helping each other all over the world. The message about the benefits of equine assisted activities is spreading.

Greek and Roman texts speak of the life affirming relationship people have with horses. In modern times, organized therapeutic riding or riding for people with disabilities seemed to develop simultaneously in England, Germany and Scandinavia in the late 1950's and early 1960's. In the United States, therapeutic riding began to be organized in the mid-1960's. In the mid-1970's, several European countries worked together to introduce the first international congress on therapeutic riding. In response to the growing need for communication among equine and rehabilitation professionals, a group of people met at the early congresses with the notion of forming an international organization for riding for the disabled. The Federation for Riding for the Disabled International (FRDI) was incorporated in 1980 in Belgium with an international Board of Directors. who serve from one international congress to the next for three year terms. Starting with an exclusively European focus, FRDI has grown to include members from more than 41 nations (see map).

For people seeking educational opportunities, international venues abound: the FRDI Congress takes place every 3 years, with the 11th congress to be held in June 2003 in Hungary. Many countries offer national conferences every year. Universities, colleges and therapeutic riding centers all over the world offer coursework, instructor and therapist training, and workshops. In some countries, concepts of hippotherapy and other equine assisted therapeutic activities are included in the curricula of medical schools. A variety of degree programs such as sports medicine, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language pathology also offer coursework teaching beneficial effects the movement of the horse may have on individuals with disabilities.

Certification of individuals is offered in many countries. Individuals must be qualified to teach individuals without disabilities before they may be certified to teach therapeutic riding. Several national equestrian federations offering instructor training and several of these countries require that therapists, special education teachers and psychologists also earn a qualification as instructor, and receive specialized training in hippotherapy and/or remedial-educational vaulting and riding before they can teach.

It is the responsibility of the FRDI to find and encourage therapeutic riding organizations across the world. It is especially exciting to witness the interest from the Eastern European Countries that formerly made up the Soviet Union, several Asian countries and South American and African nations. Research is beginning to have international collaboration, as much importance has been placed on validating what we do.

For riders with disabilities, international competition is growing very fast. The Paralympic Summer Games now include Equestrian (dressage only), and Special Olympics includes equestrian events at the national and international levels. Carriage driving has welcomed drivers with disabilities for several years to compete with their able-bodied peers. There is also international-level driving for people with disabilities.

There are even worldwide vacation destinations promoted for riders with disabilities, bringing together rider and horse in any language.

International development of therapeutic riding has challenges in the years ahead. By including a wide variety of all cultures, the challenge will be to assure that developing programs promote safety and the humane treatment of our most valuable assets - human and equine. To assist in this effort, the FRDI publishes a Directory of Education and Training in conjunction with the international congress every three years. In 2003, an international directory of acknowledged experts will be published, and will list each country's top professionals in all of the equine assisted therapeutic activities recognized by that national organization.

NARHA's annual conferences always draw international participants who come to learn from their American peers. NARHA also has a strong international connections through its members in Saudi Arabia, Israel, Japan, Taiwan, Spain and Brazil, to name only a few. Our profession is truly worldwide. When you plan your next trip away you're your NARHA center, be sure to seek out the nearest location offering equine facilitated activities and go visit. They will give you a warm welcome and you will learn so very much from the experience!

Federation Riding for the Disabled International –

Full Member Countries:

Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, Ireland, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Taiwan, UK, USA

Associate Member Countries:

Bermuda, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Georgia, Japan, Korea, Mali, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Nepal, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Africa, Switzerland, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates

International Highlights*:

- 1878 Publication of Horseback Riding from a Medical Point of View
- 1879 1952 Liz Hartel - Danish rider with polio wins silver medal at Helsinki Olympics
- 1969 NARHA founded in Middleburg, VA
- 1973 1st International Congress, Paris, France
- 1976 2nd International Congress, Basel, Switzerland
- 1979 3rd International Congress, Warwick, England
- 1980 Federation for Riding for the Disabled International established
- 1980 Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association established
- 1982 5th International CP Games, Greve, Denmark
- 1982 4th International Congress, Hamburg, Germany
- 1985 5th International Congress, Milan, Italy
- 1987 US therapists travel to Wildbad, Germany on an educational trip, sponsored by Delta Society
- 1988 6th International Congress, Toronto, Canada
- 1991 7th International Congress, Aarhus, Denmark

1994 8th International Congress, Hamilton, New Zealand
1997 9th International Congress, Denver, USA
1998 World Championship for Driving for the Disabled
1999 The first National TR conference in Brazil
2000 International Hippotherapy Clinic in Moscow
2000 10th International Congress, Angers, France
2000 Paralympics, Sydney Australia
2002 International Education Sub-Committee established by the AHA
2002 World Carriage Driving (for Disabled) Championships, Amiens, France
2003 11th international Congress, Budapest, Hungary

- This is only a partial list

NARHA Instructors International!

While the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association primarily attracts members from the United States, an increasing number of international practitioners are finding NARHA certification meaningful to their work in equine assisted activities. At present, NARHA Certified Instructors can be found in the following countries.

Belgium
Brazil
Canada
Croatia
Germany
Ireland
Israel
Japan
Mexico
Northern Ireland
Saudi Arabia
Slovak Republic
Spain
United Arab Emirate

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