

# The Unusual Benefits of Horses

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TEXT: SUZY JARRATT

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What do an Italian tenor, an Israeli real estate agent and a British writer have in common? All are blind and all have a strong affiliation with horses, because when you live in a world of darkness a horse can provide independence, companionship and inspiration.







Previous page: Verity Smith riding Szekei. Image Brice Braastad. Opposite: Andrea Bocelli and foal.  
Above left: Bocelli says, "The horses see instead of me. Their eyes replace mine." Above right: A guide horse at work in Israel.

They are instruments of freedom, ideal companions and have a genuine contact with nature," said Andrea Bocelli, who was born with congenital glaucoma. (His mother had been given medication for peritonitis when she was pregnant and had been warned her forthcoming baby could be disabled).

Bocelli was partially sighted until he was 12, when he lost his vision completely during a football game after being hit in the eye when goalkeeping. He was brought up on his family's property in La Sterza near Lajatico, Tuscany, where they sold farm machinery and made wine. He always had an interest in horses.

"I was eight when I began having riding lessons and when my father bought me my own pony I couldn't wait to go off on my own," said Bocelli. "Her name was Stella and she was by an Arabian stallion out of a pony mare from the Avelengo region, which is a mountain village above Merano famous for Haflingers.

"She was a small, sturdy workhorse and had a docile

character, which was very important. I rode bareback at first using an old bridle with a snaffle bit. I used to fall off a lot and Stella was very patient with me.

"I've spent fantastic moments with horses. They've always been much more than a hobby. They're a source of relaxation and a shelter to run to when things are really bad," explained the 59-year-old singer who, after every concert tour, returns to his Italian base to ride and be with horses. Over the years he has bred Arabians, ridden different breeds at various equestrian academies and sung with them on stage. He was sitting on one when the curtain went up on his American debut at the Michigan Opera House in 1999 and he has continued to work with them ever since.

According to his secretary, Alessia Navarino, he still has a small horse stud at which stand two PRE (Pura Raza Espanola) stallions.

"They are Caudillo and Nevado," she told EN&L, "and they are very active. We used to have an Arabian filly but we sold her." She was unable to provide any more information; her major role

is as a secretary in Bocelli's business and management office in Forte dei Marmi.

About 80km from that office is Bocelli's property in Lajatico, where he often rides at night because it's quieter and more peaceful.

"The horse is happier," he said, "and there are many beautiful paths between the fields. I also love skiing and windsurfing but, most of all, I love to ride. Luckily I never seem to have any accidents, and thank God for that."

He spoke too soon. In September this year he fell on his head after his stallion bucked. Appearing confused when being administered first aid, he was airlifted to a hospital in Pisa but was soon released.

"I was fine, it was just a trivial fall," he told reporters, and immediately began preparing for his next overseas concert.

He has sung all around the world. "You know one place that really resonated with me was Israel. The whole region had a very special atmosphere. It was one of the few countries in which I've performed when I've had some time to explore and I was hugely impressed by all the religious history there."

Had Bocelli known, he could have visited the Rozalis family and its unique equestrian establishment working with miniature horses as therapy.

Forty-three-year old Rafi Rozalis, his wife and three children live on a property at Moshav Bnai Atarot in central Israel.

"My wife and I have been involved with horses for a long time," explained Rozalis. "A couple of years ago we decided to work with them professionally and began researching and training miniatures for a variety of treatment areas, such as horse therapy, emotional therapy for special education and retirement homes, and assisted mobility for people with all kinds of disabilities, especially with balance issues."

A showjumper in his earlier days, Rozalis has been riding for over thirty years.

"Recently we opened the first stables for the blind in Israel," he told EN&L. "We wanted to give the blind population a safe and comfortable place to come and interact with the horses and ride for free. In addition, we provide transportation to and from the stables – also free of charge. This project is extremely important, as it connects the blind with the world of horses."

He also trains miniatures to become guide ponies, something which, to the uninitiated, seems fraught with impracticalities.

"At present, the project is designed for the blind living in rural areas, where the horse can live outside with water and food. In my opinion, after researching guide dogs, especially Labradors, I found they tended to frequently become unwell, whereas horses actually suffered less from diseases and allergies," declared Rozalis, who liaises with several people in the USA who use guide ponies.

*"The horses see instead of me. Their eyes replace mine. I don't see it as an obstacle – absolutely not. Riding horses is as natural for a blind person as it is for one who's sighted. You may not know this, but in the Italian military, soldiers are taught to jump obstacles blindfolded."* ~ ANDREA BOCELLI





*“They’re not for everyone, but there’s a strong demand for guide horses among blind horse lovers, those who are allergic to dogs, and those who want a guide animal with a longer lifespan.” ~ GUIDE HORSE FOUNDATION, NORTH CAROLINA, USA*



*The guide ponies are chosen according to their ability to learn and for height and character. Teaching begins when they’re about eight months and lasts for around a year.*

“One of the women I’m in contact with, Anna, has been happily living with a guide horse for fifteen years. I’m also receiving instruction and help from an American trainer.”

He chooses the horses carefully and, so far, all have turned out successfully. “I fly to Belgium, where I work in cooperation with a miniature breeding centre and do some preparatory work before importing the ponies. They’re chosen according to their ability to learn and, of course, for height and character.

“Teaching begins when they’re about eight months and lasts for about a year. Daily training consists of 70% exposure to daily routines, such as taking them with me to the bank or supermarket – these are the routines of an average person. The other 30% is teaching them commands such as: ‘forward’, ‘stop’, ‘step up’, and so on.”

And the question on everyone’s lips: How about toilet training?

“A horse can be trained similarly to a dog,” Rozalis told *EN&L*. “We can study the period of time when a horse needs to relieve himself and then give him a comfortable place to do his business. And, like a dog, you collect after him. There’s also the option of placing a diaper under the tail to collect the manure. When I know it’s time for the horse to urinate, we scatter some sawdust on the ground which absorbs it and is simple to collect. This is actually easier and better than a dog using the lawn!”

The more sceptical among us might need a little bit more convincing!

And how does he go about introducing an appropriate pony and coaching the blind handler?

“The process begins with an interview to find a guide that’s a suitable match. Once that’s made the person lives at the stables in a dormitory for a few weeks under the supervision of the team. After this training the pony is transferred to the blind person free of charge, who must sign a declaration that he or she will not give that pony to another person. And all parties must be in agreement that the pony and the person have satisfactorily acclimatised. The end goal is that the horse and his/her new owner will live happily together for many years. Mr Kochavi is one of the people presently training with us.”

A former real estate agent, Kochavi presently has a guide dog which will be finishing its term with him in a couple of months’ time. He suffers from an hereditary disease which caused him to lose his sight fifteen years ago.

“I underwent surgery and for a while I could see, but now I’m blind again and it’s forever. I’m really excited at the prospect of having a pony. I think it’s important that blind people have choices.”

Most of the funding of this venture comes from Rozalis and his family. “We’re a small team and spend most of our time training the horses and working with the different groups who come to our stables. However, fund raising is extremely important to our organisation’s future. We’re trying to raise more funds from around the world in order to provide guide ponies to the blind in this country at no cost. Today the State of Israel gives a very small amount to our project, but most of our funding stems from donations.”

And that is what philanthropic organisations rely on, as

do many blind individuals who dream of achieving something which many who are sighted would dismiss as a far-fetched ambition.

Many miles from Israel, in Denmark, Western Australia, there is a 24-year-old girl suffering from albinism. “I’ve no pigment in my hair, skin and eyes, I’ve only got 5% vision and I’m vulnerable to sunburn and skin cancer,” said Naomi Ogden.

“I’ve always been obsessed with horses, but my family didn’t have a lot of money. Mum took me to riding lessons once in a while whenever she could afford it. I finally got my first horse after saving up the money I earned from paid work experience. He was a Standardbred, I’d take him trail riding and he was the one I could trust.

“Now I’ve got a 19-year-old Thoroughbred who was given to me by the Denmark College of Agriculture. My ambition is to ride at the Paralympics, but he’s not very advanced in dressage.”

Her first taste of competition was on Amelia, a Friesian owned by Dianne Hill’s Friso Stud.

“She lent me the mare temporarily because my Thoroughbred was lame. I’m having lessons from Lynn Boon from Riding for the Disabled,” explained Naomi, who lives alone on a pension, is unable to drive and relies on others for lifts to the stables. “People think I’m a bit reckless as all my money goes into horses, but I’ve made my mind up – and I’ve got one sponsor

already, Winning Edge PEMF Therapy. All I need now is a good horse of my own!”

Naomi has a long, long road ahead of her, but she is determined. And those who have already travelled that road still need ongoing perseverance.

Verity Smith, 43, is an international para equestrian, a songwriter, author and campaigner. She has less than 10 per cent vision. At the age of eight her sight began to deteriorate because of a rare genetic condition and she was registered blind at 16. She presently lives in the South of France.

“I was born and raised in Gloucestershire,” Verity told *EN&L*. “However, my family have lived here in France for the past 25 years and I decided to move permanently away from the UK after my father died, as I wanted to be geographically closer to my loved ones.

“I live alone with Uffa, my Labradoodle guide dog. Thank you Australia for creating such a wonderful breed, he really is the best guide dog in the world!”

“It’s wonderful that they’re training miniature ponies to guide the blind, but surely they’re restricted by certain environments. I do wonder about the flight instincts of the ponies being an issue, as I’d not fancy being dragged up the road in high heels at a gallop due to a flapping plastic bag on the pavement! I don’t think they’ll ever replace the trusted dog.”

*“I forget about everything that I will never be able to do. When I’m riding, I have complete freedom.”*

*~ NAOMI OGDEN, DENMARK, WESTERN AUSTRALIA*





Above: Verity Smith and Szevit. Left: Verity with her guide dog Uffa. Images: Brice Braastad.

Her trusted dressage horse is an Oldenburg gelding Szevit by Sandro Hit out of a Rubenstein mare.

"We're currently out competing at Prix St Georges/Inter 1 against able-bodied riders and winning!" she proudly declared. "We're preparing to start back in para competitions (in the past she was a member of Great Britain's Para Team) and I intend to take Szevit out at Grand Prix next year, so we'll be competing in both para and able-bodied classes."

Prior to Rio in 2016 Verity had been training hard with Olympic riders Sandy Philips and Laura Tomlinson, but she had her dreams derailed by the 'Blindfold Rule' brought in to ensure parity.

"This was a dangerous rule which made the wearing of a blindfold obligatory for all medically classified blind riders from January 2015 onwards. I'd been training for years and with a year to go, they completely change the rules. It was totally unfair. I may only have 10 per cent vision, but if you only have one finger, then that finger is vitally important.

"The ruling meant it wasn't about learning your sport, it meant having to learn to cope with another disability - bureaucracy blinkering ambition and affecting people's dreams."

This resulted in her creating the 'Beat the Blindfold' campaign and in November 2016 the rule was overturned.

"I connected with a lot of blind riders around the world at that time, all of whom have been an incredible inspiration to me. My goal now is to participate in the Tokyo Olympics, representing France with dual nationality.

"I ride six days a week, mostly alone, but with regular monthly training from my coaches. I count my strides and work in a 60m by 20m arena so collisions are few and far between!

I always have my team of human callers with me at every competition - affectionately known as 'the Scoobies'. They're an amazing group of volunteers who give up their time to bravely scream letters at a galloping horse with a blind girl on board!"

As well as riding, Verity is also composing, performing and writing and plans to release a new album, plus a sequel to *The Gropers Guide*, a humorous account of the travels and tribulations she experienced while growing up as a blind explorer, 'whose perspective of the world added a new dimension to an already colourful planet'. Her new publication, *The Must Have Accessory*, will be published in Autumn 2018.

"Because of my competition schedule I've not had much time

*"When I was told at the age of eight that I was going blind and would never be able to drive a car, I replied, 'That's okay, my horse can see for me'. So it was, as the world faded from my eyes, horses solidified in my heart, enabling me to ride the storm of my disability."* ~ VERITY SMITH, GREAT BRITAIN PARA-EQUESTRIAN DRESSAGE RIDER





Verity Smith and Szekit. "We're currently out competing at Prix St Georges/Inter 1 against able-bodied riders and winning!" she told EN&L. Image: Brice Braasatd.

to perform. However, the beauty of dressage is that it marries my two passions of horses and music, which means that the Freestyle dressage test gives me that performance thrill."

Verity has a deep love for horses but she is also sensible and organised in their company.

"Being blind, I can't afford to risk either the horses' safety or my own. To be honest I think that's just good horse sense, it's just a little more enforced upon me by my disability. The only fear I ever have is keeping the horses safe as I'm unable to see danger coming, which is why I never hack out unless accompanied by someone on the ground.

"Dressage is an amazing sport for a blind rider as it's a dance routine set on a stage in which the points of reference never change. This means that with determination, training, blood sweat and tears you can be the best you can be without your eyesight getting a look in." Δ

*Part Two in the next edition of EN&L: Canadian blind kids meet the horses from Cavalia. What's next for Sue-Ellen Lovett, Australia's blind para-equestrian? Ponies bringing joy at Homes for the Blind in Scotland.*



#### All about Uffa

The British Guide Dog Association named him when he was a pup after Uffa Fox, a famous British sailor. He goes by many names. When he met H.M. The Queen last Christmas he was introduced as Lord Uffington. Our local butcher calls him Stuffa due to his love of all things meaty and most of my French friends call him Truffle.

He is a first generation Labradoodle bred by the Guide Dog Association. His father was a black standard poodle called Paddy and his mum, Polly, was a black Labrador.

He is probably one of the most travelled guide dogs in the world and has accumulated many 'Hair Miles' over his nine years as a working pooch. In a previous life I think he was a white van driver as he loves nothing more than weaving in and out of bustling crowds in New York, Paris and London. He is my wingman and never puts a paw wrong.

He has performed with me in a trapeze show, accompanies me to dressage competitions and has been on stage with me when I have given speeches and appeared in concerts. Quite simply he is a wonder dog whom I trust and adore. If only I could find a man as well trained! - Verity Smith

*"I've had over 40 years of experience judging, training and riding and I've found riders benefit from occasionally closing their eyes for a few strides. This heightens awareness of both their own and their horses' balance and movement. It also assists those who sit very stiffly to feel how the horse moves its back and hindlegs and can help the rider with the timing of their aids.*

*"By closing the eyes riders can better feel if their bodies lean forward, whether the horses sit behind in transitions, speed up or slow down, or if the horses and riders lose their vertical balance. This helps riders become aware of the effectiveness of the seat aid and how to relax their seats. This, in turn, will allow the horses' hindlegs to swing into the riders' seats and find an effective balance point.*

*"For riders to really progress they have to feel more intuitively and I find this has great benefit."*

~ VICKY LYMBERY, NSW AUSTRALIA.

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