

## What Horse Riding Means to Me...

When I first began horse riding, I had only recently started to begin re-learning how to walk. I was still reliant on my wheelchair, especially when I was expected to travel fairly long distances, and was using two crutches for short distances. My physiotherapist often reinforced the point that if I wanted to progress and walk normally again, I would have to put in the hard work and begin to exercise and push myself. The problem with this is that I have never been particularly motivated when it comes to exercising. I find the idea of exercising purely to exercise monotonous and boring, so it was essential for me to find an activity that I would enjoy, otherwise there would have been no way that I would have continued with it. Horse riding is a form of physical exercise which I really enjoy – it doesn't feel like exercise at all, because I do it to have fun. The physical side of it, the benefits that everyone can see, is that my muscles are building in my legs, I have more stamina and I'm able to do a lot more than I could when I first began – both in riding and other aspects of life, such as walking. My fitness levels have improved significantly and I don't get as tired as quickly. I believe the horse riding has really helped me to develop this, as a rising trot is no easy feat for a person with weakened legs! Even this has become easier for me over time, and that's how I know I'm still improving. I progressed to using two walking sticks whilst I was riding, then just one for support, and now I use nothing at all. It's such a huge difference, and I really feel the riding has helped with my posture and balance, which was in need of a little work after not being used for so long.

However, the psychological benefits, the ones that maybe not so many people can see, far outweigh the physical ones in my opinion. Not only am I ridiculously happy after a good lesson, but it makes me feel like I can do anything. I can achieve anything I set out to do. A year ago, I couldn't walk. I didn't know what activities I would be able to do. I didn't know if I'd be able to do simple things, like standing in the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea, and now I'm beginning to canter on a horse. It's a big leap forward, one that is impossible for me to ignore, or not to feel pleased with. So it gives me hope – if I can do this, if I've worked up to this point, then surely, in time, I'll be able to go out and dance with my friends on a night out.

Not only that, but I find the horses very therapeutic to be around. They're very gentle and sensitive, and they make me feel calm and happy when I'm around them. The horse I usually ride, George, has such a wonderful character. I feel like I've developed a good bond with him, and that connection with an animal has always made me feel good, almost special. It's like a friendship that's unique to the two of you. I feel like we're a partnership when we're riding; it's not me that's telling him what to do, we're working together, and feeling like I'm working with him encourages me to work well, as he does for me.

I also like how animals encourage you to become more independent as you have to care for them and yourself. I don't take care of George the way that the volunteers do, but I've learned to untack him at the end of my lessons, which I really enjoy doing, and I've been slowly getting him to trust me so he'll take food from me. Gaining an animal's trust is hard work and often a slow progress, but incredibly rewarding. He took a carrot from me last week, the first time he'd taken something from me without Dawn being present, and it left me feeling really elated.

Overall, riding has been incredibly rewarding for me, both physically and psychologically and I see the benefits of it whenever I'm able to do a bit more, or do something new that I couldn't have done the day before. It's been brilliant, and I love every second of it. Even the times when I very nearly fall off, but they're becoming less frequent. Honest.