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## Therapeutic value of equestrian sports

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Emotionally abused, physically and mentally handicapped children will soon be exposed to the therapeutic elements of equestrian sports at The Gallop Ranch.

Situated in Desa Putra, Kajang, a 15-minute drive from the Kajang toll, the 5.66ha ranch has ample ground to enable these children to develop a love for the sport.

Ranch owner Md Azar Ismail hopes to host the first batch of handicapped children some time in October.

"We will approach handicapped organisations and shelters in Kajang and invite them here once a week.

"Equestrian sports teaches these children self-confidence and balance," Md Azar said, adding that his trainer at the ranch was experienced in training handicapped children.

The trainer, John Phillips Robin, said horse riding was a good way for the handicapped to develop communication skills and give them responsibilities.

Having been a trainer for 10 years in France and two more at the Gallop Ranch, Robin explained that horses are very sensitive creatures and it was a full-time job taking care of them.

"Interacting with horses brings out the love and care of the handicapped children and it opens them up to another world.

"It is hard to put in words how a child feels when given the responsibility to take care of something," Robin said.

He cited an example of an abused boy in France who was caged in a kennel and had his food thrown to him like he was a dog.

"When the boy was taken away from his family, he could not speak as he had been so emotionally and mentally scarred.

"We used horse riding as a method to help him communicate and open up. When we put him in the saddle, he had no choice but to speak as he did not know how to convey his fear of being so high above the ground and towards an unknown animal.

"With handicapped children, even if they take a month to just pat the horse for a minute, it is an accomplishment," Robin said.

For physically handicapped children, special machines are required to place them on the horses.

"They feel better about themselves when they are riding as they have been confined to their wheelchairs for so long," Robin said.

The ranch was established in 1996. It has 24 horses and three ponies. Family friends also use the ranch and house their horses in one of its 38 stables.

Md Azar said the horses at the ranch were competition horses, either dressage or showjumpers.

"We are providing lessons for RM75 but promotions are done by word of mouth only," he said, adding that he had another trainer also from France.

"It is difficult to promote equestrian sports among Malaysians as awareness is low.

"At the same time, we do not have qualified local trainers, support from the public and funds," Md Azar said, adding that it was incorrect for people to label the sport as being only for the elite.

"It is for everybody and there are many clubs (the Equestrian Association of Malaysia has 21 affiliated clubs) offering training lessons

for as low as RM5 per hour."

Md Azar added that the ranch was organising the largest equestrian competition ever in Malaysia beginning Thursday.

The Gallop 7th Merdeka Equestrian Carnival to be held at the Bukit Kiara Equestrian and Country Resort will dedicate itself to children as this was the best way to promote the sport.

The competition's aim is to encourage and develop the sport in Malaysia while attracting students and their parents to the show in an attempt to create awareness.

"Who knows? We may be able to find some new riders among them," Md Azar said.

Forty Klang Valley schools and colleges have been invited to attend the carnival. Stalls will be set up by the various sponsors and children will be given free lunch packs, ice cream and other gifts.

The four-day event will be opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Sunday.

The idea for the show was first mooted in 1992 with the encouragement of the Prime Minister himself. The carnival is held annually in conjunction with National Day celebrations.

The show is traditionally organised by the Equestrian Association of Malaysia. This year, however, the EAM has chosen The Gallop Ranch as the main organiser. The Ranch is also the event's main sponsor.

The purpose of the show is to enhance the interaction and exchange of information among riders throughout the region.

About 80 riders and 150 horses are signed up for the competition including those from Indonesia, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore.

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