

OnTRA Scores Another Successful Appearance at 2007 Royal Agricultural Winter Fair

By Peter Henderson, past president, Ontario Therapeutic Riding Association

Thirteen years ago, when the Ontario Therapeutic Riding Association (OnTRA) made its debut at The Royal's General Motors' Walking Ring (renamed Spirit of the Horse in 2005), admittedly the organization didn't make much of a splash. Our presence consisted of a small booth with a few photographs and a poster listing the names of our 18 member centres.

Well, we've grown since then and so has our participation in the Fair's Spirit of the Horse community. In November 2007, OnTRA's multi-booth display, manned by enthusiastic volunteers, offered Fair visitors loads of things to see and do—video presentations to riding demonstrations. Our annual appearance at The Royal also provides our organization with an opportunity to achieve a number of objectives. Therapeutic riding is beneficial.

Since OnTRA is the provincial-governing body for Ontario's therapeutic riding industry, one of our key objectives is to promote wider public knowledge of this important discipline. There's an old adage that says, 'a picture's worth a thousand words'. And that's certainly true when it comes to promoting OnTRA's programs. Far better than any brochure, a demonstration of therapeutic horsemanship gives people a clearer understanding of the mental and motor benefits that riders come to enjoy through OnTRA programs.

So, several times throughout the two-week Fair, riders and volunteers from TEAD and SUNRISE (western Ontario member centres) took turns demonstrating a typical lesson. While riders went through their paces in the Spirit of the Horse ring, an MC also gave the audience a quick introduction



Emma Dendekker from TEAD - Equestrian Association for the Disabled, Hamilton, on Robin, during the OnTRA/TEAD/SUNRISE musical ride presentation. Photo by Marshall Davidson, equine photography, www.fotoworks.ca

to the five-Ws of therapeutic riding.

This year, to the audience's delight, Judi Island, a Paralympic medal-winning equestrian as well as an OnTRA Director, joined in the ring presentations to give personal testimony and support to the OnTRA cause. She captivated visitors as she told them of the car accident that changed her life and left her in a wheelchair. She took them through her long recovery that included horsemanship riding in certified OnTRA programs and competitions. She concluded her inspiring story by telling how she went on to represent Canada in both World and Paralympic competition.

At the end of each and every presentation, the audience was encouraged to get more information at the nearby OnTRA booth, an invitation that resulted in 183 people dropping by to fill-in and leave contact-request cards. OnTRA staff and other volunteers from member centres, CARD, TEAD, and SUNRISE, were on hand to meet, greet and answer visitors' questions. In addition, they distributed over 1,000 copies of the OnTRA Centre Location Guide that lists our more than 40 member centres across the province.

Riders' skills are showcased

Another important reason for our annual appearance at The Royal is just to "show off" the amazing horsemanship our riders have developed through OnTRA programs. Each weekend, four riders from TEAD and SUNRISE thrilled the audience with a precision musical ride. Dressed as lions—complete with whiskers and tails—our young riders were flawless as they completed intricate moves at

both the walk and trot, and often delighting the audience with a wave. Special guests who came to watch included 2007-08 Canadian Equestrian Team riders Ian Millar, Jill Henselwood and Mac Cone, plus Canadian Equestrian legends (1967 Team) Jimmy Elder and Terrance (Torchy) Millar. Other VIP guests included Bill Duron, CEO of the RAWF and Knox Henry, President of the Canadian National Exhibition. But, the list didn't stop there. Organizations, such as the Ontario Equestrian Federation (OEF), and Equine Canada sent representatives, as did companies like System Fencing, Kubota, Pizza Nova, Greenhawk Equestrian Supplies, and Real Clean Gear. Following the ride, several of the guests presented each rider with a personalized certificate recognizing his or her participation in the 2007 Royal Agricultural Winter Fair—a very special time for both riders and the audience. Therapeutic riding owes a tremendous round of thanks to the staff, riders and volunteers from SUNRISE and TEAD for the effort they put into making this such a success.

Fundraising also an important goal

While promoting awareness is certainly a primary mandate for OnTRA, raising funds to support our programs is equally important. Thanks to the dedication of our centres' wonderful volunteers and horses, OnTRA programs serve more than 4,000 challenged riders and drivers each year.

Over the past eight years, one of OnTRA's most reliable ways to raise funds has come through our partnership with Equine Simulators Inc., an Ontario supplier of life-size electronic horses that produce close-to-real gaits. The "horses" have been a popular feature at many, many OnTRA exhibits, including previous Royal Agricultural Winter Fairs.

In November, with the help of South Algonquin Trails' staff, OnTRA stabled the horses in our number-two booth location on the north side of the Spirit of the Horse ring. As usual, the big black steeds were a hit. A sign saying, "Try our Perfectly Schooled Horses", attracted thousands of visitors—toddler-age to seniors—many



Rider Haley Veit from Sunrise Therapeutic Riding & Learning Centre, Guelph, on Prince Caspian during OnTRA's demonstration showing typical therapeutic riding exercises to improve muscle and balance.

of whom experienced the thrill of riding for the first time. With rides costing just a toonie (for an additional \$3 riders also got a photo of themselves), OnTRA did a brisk business. While waiting for their turn to climb into the saddle, visitors also browsed the booth's selection of equestrian apparel and horse-themed items that were perfect for holiday-season gift giving. Thanks to many

Although an appearance at The Royal always pays off in terms of achieving our promotional and fund-raising goals, it's a demanding affair that requires the hard work of many. We owe our success at the 2007 Fair to a long list of organizations, such as the RAWF and the OEF, as well as volunteers from member centres, TEAD, CARD, and SUNRISE. Thanks again, we couldn't have done it without you!



Judi Island, Paralympic Equestrian gives inspirational presentation in support of OnTRA with the help of Heather Dominy and her lovely Arabian, Ferrari.



Sunrise riders receiving personalized certificate recognizing their participation in the 2007 RAWF- left Sunrise rider Phoebe James, Bill Duron, CEO Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, Sunrise rider Ryan Milford, Kelly Nicholls, Vice President Sales and Marketing Greenhawk Inc., Sunrise rider Sarah Byars, John Gilliland, National Sales Manager Kubota Canada Ltd., Sunrise rider Brooke Fenton, Knox Henry, President Canadian National Exhibition. Photo by Yavus Photography



Canadian Equestrian Team presentation to T.E.A.D. riders after their musical ride. L to R Cassie Fruck, Matthew Gabrielle, Ian Millar, Peter Henderson (OnTRA Past President), Jill Henselwood, Mac Cone, Emma Dendekker, Danielle Smith. Photo credit: Marshall Davidson, equine photography, www.fotoworks.ca

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