

Children and 'The Skyrian Horse' – A Perfect Match

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On the beautiful, lush Greek Island of Corfu there is a very unique equestrian center. Near the town of Kerkyra, The Silva Project www.thesilvaproject.org runs a riding academy and horsemanship center for children, with and without 'special needs' and adults. Some of what makes these programs unique is the use of a very rare breed of Greek small horse called the Skyrian for the programs younger participants.

Skyrian horses have a blood line going back thousands of years. They are small pony size, being around 10 or 11 hands high, with the perfect conformation of a normal sized horse. They are mentioned in very old manuscripts as: Αρχαίο Ελληνικό Ιππάριον, (ancient small Greek horse) and existed on many of the Aegean islands for centuries. They are called "Skyrian" because they survived on the island of Skyros for hundreds of years working very hard for the farmers. But in the '60s, farming on Skyros became mechanized and the need for these wonderful horses was lost. Sylvia Steen became aware of the horses and their plight of diminishing numbers and in 1996 The Silva Project was formed dedicated to preservation of the breed that is the Skyrian horse. They are hearty and have a very even tempered personality. It's this lovely, compliant personality, even temperament, along with their size, that makes them ideal and very uniquely suited as a therapy horse, or a personal horse, for small children.

I have been an equine professional for over 40 years and a provider of therapeutic riding and Equine Facilitated Learning for special needs children for over 20 years. I travel to 6 countries a year training horses and providing and teaching EFL. A normal size horse can sometimes be very daunting for any small child to get used to and comfortable with. It can be challenging for a therapeutic riding center to find suitable smaller horses for the very young children in their programs. While ponies are often tried, their personalities and choppy gaits many times are not well-suited to this sort of work.

Several months ago I was invited to Corfu by Mrs. Steen to offer a seminar in horsemanship and EFL at her facility. I was introduced to her herd of 30 Skyrians and was amazed at the perfect conformation of such a small horse. But what really got my attention with these horses was their innate easy going temperament, their ability to learn, their affinity for humans (big and small) and the ease with which very young children could handle and ride them.

The Skyrians are exceptionally good for youngsters with learning, behavioral and various physiological and physical disorders. They perform very well with mounted activities for smaller children as young as 3-years-old and less than 40kg. Classical riding and traditional therapeutic riding techniques can readily be used with these horses and students. They easily adapted to the needs of the individual client, as I found the horses were able to integrate changes in patterns and routines on the spot (showing patience and tolerance). Benefits such as developing coordination, balance, sensory integration and more through the horse's smooth and rhythmic movement are easily observed. Special educational materials were applied to provide continuing interest in and expansion of the sessions. For example; putting colored rings on sticks as the student rides by, throwing felt covered numbered and lettered blocks onto a sticky board in competition with other riders and more, were often used. Additionally, the enhanced levels of self-esteem, confidence, attention span to the task at hand, willingness to listen to instructions and make a good effort, enhanced communication, connectedness to the animal and awareness of surroundings as shown by the children, were very observable and extremely beneficial.

One of the most prevalent difficulties and challenges within therapeutic riding centers I have seen in many countries is the lack of solid horsemanship and knowledge of horses provided by staff and volunteers. Often dangerous behavioral problems with their horses arise because of the inappropriate ways in which the horses are handled and kept. A horse may come to a center with good training and the right attitude. But it doesn't take long for the horse to become soured and unsafe because of the level of unconscious and unknowledgeable horsemanship provided by those handling and maintaining the horse. It is for these reasons

I attempt to convince and inspire the centers I visit that they need to implement basic horsemanship courses for all their personnel. I taught some of my gentle, effective training methods to a number of the staff and volunteers at The Silva Project. I used the Skyrian horses in these classes. Some were untrained yearlings and some were a bit older. No matter what age the horses were, they all learned quickly, showed patience with the training process, sustained interest (longer than the limited attention span of many horses) and a lovely willingness to please and comply with a patient, good intentioned human leader. I brought in several young children to handle and interact with the horses as well, and I was pleasantly surprised at how good even the younger horses, worked with the children. The horses actually showed significant tolerance if a child didn't know exactly the correct way to ask for a particular movement.

While the worth of the Skyrian horses is clear, they unfortunately remain an endangered species. There are approximately 235 pure bred Skyrians remaining world wide. The Silva Project and Sylvia Steen, the Project's founder and director, have as their primary goals the preservation and continuation of this breed and to provide Skyrian horses to other interested, qualified equestrian and therapeutic horsemanship centers, and interested private individuals whenever and wherever possible. Of the remaining Skyrians, 21 are currently at the Silva Project's facility, many having been born there. The uniquely wonderful traits and abilities of the Skyrian horses have already caught the attention of several high-level therapeutic and mainstream riding academies in Greece and they have acquired some of these horses. Ten from The Silva Project have already been placed in these other facilities. As a professional horseman, teacher and provider of Equine Facilitated Learning, I wish to strongly urge all interested organizations and parties to visit www.thesilvaproject.org and look into the possibilities of expanding their horsemanship programs to better accommodate younger children, whether special needs or not. I whole-heartedly recommend the Skyrian Horse as one of the finest, best suited, most versatile and talented horses that could be introduced into a youth horsemanship program. The Silva Project is happy to host visitors who wish to come to Corfu to meet the Skyrian horses and can assist to arrange transport of the horses to any location world-wide. I personally am available to answer questions about the horses or provide additional information. I can be reached through my website at: www.WayoftheHorse.org. Sylvia Steen can be reached through The Silva Project website at: www.TheSilvaProject.org.