

The Ideal Therapy Horse

By Cindy Ross

Many factors are considered when looking for a new therapy horse. Following are the basic guidelines:

Age:	6 to 14 years old (Horses/ponies outside this range may still be considered on a case by case basis.)
Gender:	Mare or gelding (geldings are slightly preferred)
Height:	15.3 hands or under (one hand equals 4 inches). Horses over this height make side walking/guarding more difficult and less effective. Ponies (14.2 and under) are welcome and we have found them very useful with many of the smaller riders.
Soundness:	Horse does not have physical problems that cause it to limp, stumble or be uncomfortable with or without a rider at all gaits (walk/trot/canter). Horse is sound and comfortable without the need for corrective shoes, expensive feed supplements, or medication.
“Bomb-Proof”	Horse displays confidence in different environments and does not react strongly to external stimuli. Sudden movements and loud noises are not perceived as a threat to the horse. If startled, the horse plants its feet and looks toward the sound/noise/movement without feeling the need to flee.
Temperament:	The horse is calm and quiet, reacts positively to human interaction, is willing to be cooperative and learn new things. Ideally, the horse can be trustworthy off lead with a beginner rider without running away or taking advantage of the rider's inexperience.
Condition:	Horses work best with us when they have been in active use and in good physical condition prior to their trial. Horses that have been put out to pasture with limited handling are generally not good candidates.
Vices:	The horse should not bite, kick, buck, crib (biting onto objects and sucking air), stall walking/weaving (pacing in the stall like a caged tiger). Vices are often indications of aggression, health problems, restlessness and discontent.

The 60-Day Trial Period

The trial period is a time for the horse to live at Sunnyside while its suitability for therapeutic riding is thoroughly evaluated. During this time the owner is still financially responsible for the horse's farrier and veterinary needs. We feed and care for the horse.

The horse is groomed and handled in the stable. It is worked in hand and under saddle at all gaits. It is exposed to balls, mounting blocks, leader, and side walkers, loud noises, sudden movements, unbalanced weight on its back, pressure on all parts of the body, etc. Body language and reactions are noted as are how quickly negative reactions are improved. Tolerance is extremely important. How well does the horse stand and tolerate things? How does the horse react when its tolerance is tested? How quickly does the horse learn and comply with what is being asked of it? A horse that demonstrates a positive attitude, with an eagerness to learn and understand, has very good potential.

I hope this gives you insight into the process of accepting a new horse into the SPUR program. Horses that do well on trial are donated or purchased by SPUR and become property of the Monmouth County Park System. The owner must be willing to relinquish ownership of the horse.

This process is ever evolving and not foolproof. Negative behaviors may develop at any time following a trial, indicating the horse may not be able to tolerate working a therapy horse. In such cases, the horse is taken out of program and given a break. Often a vacation is all that was needed! In other cases the horse may be offered back to the previous owner or retired.