

# Riding High

The RDA, Riding Activities for People with Disabilities

By Danielle Hartmann

RDA is a voluntary, not for profit, organisation that provides riding instruction and riding activities for people with disabilities. It operates in every state and was originally set up in Queensland back in the 60s. In NSW alone, there are 38 centres that cater for over 1,500 riders. It's one of the few organisations that caters for multi disabilities whether they be physical or mental. There are over 300 registered horses who've been through training. NSW President, Margaret Norman, explains "The horses are really special and have to show that they can deal with all sorts of situations. We always have a need for volunteers. These roles include coaches, people to lead the horses around, carers to ensure our horses have water and shade when tethered, right through to people organising the canteen refreshments. Our volunteers are the backbone of the Association. We couldn't survive without them."

Margaret has been involved in RDA in a number of roles since hearing about it back in the 70s. "My daughter was a keen rider and I heard about the concept and thought that it sounded like something that I could get involved with. It's so rewarding when you see how it affects people with disabilities. It's not a new concept. The Greeks used riding as rehabilitation for wounded soldiers starting way back in the 5th Century."

Some riders with more severe disabilities are assisted initially by up to two trained side walkers and a leader, however, many graduate to riding independently, and to competition level. Classes are varied and include the use of games, music, co-ordination exercises, trail rides and competition.

Horse riding is a unique form of exercise and rehabilitation. The complex movement of the horse helps to improve co-ordination, balance, muscular development and fitness. Horse riding and horse related activities assist greatly in the development and restoration of personal confidence, self esteem, communication skills, leadership and trust. Of course, getting up close and personal with a horse is probably a great therapy in itself.

Jan Pike is in her early fifties and is a keen athlete having represented Australia internationally at Equestrian events. She specialises in Dressage and trains most weekends preparing for competitions. She's as smart as a whip, has a deep commitment to her sport and has a great sense of humour. She also has Cerebral Palsy.

In her 25 years of horse riding, Jan has achieved more than most able-bodied people. She won two silver medals and a bronze at the 2004 Athens Paralympics, competing on her favourite horse, Dr. Doullittle. Dr. Doullittle entered Jan's life back in 2003 at the World Dressage Championships. As a team, they won two silver medals and have a close bond. As

Jan says "Dr. Doullittle is an incredibly special horse. He's much more to me than just a team-mate, I feel like he's my soul mate. He was purchased by an anonymous donor after seeing me compete at the championships in Belgium. Still to this day I have no idea who that donor is but I'm incredibly grateful. Through the Athens games I kept getting text messages from a private number. They were constantly enquiring as to how I was doing. It was all a bit 'James Bond' really."

Dr. Doullittle was purchased for Riding for the Disabled (RDA) as a squad horse and is on lease to Jan for competitions. He was brought from Germany to Australia and as Jan explains "He's multilingual: he understands German, English and Cerebral Palsy".

There were unforeseen setbacks that Jan and the Australian team had to overcome in the preparation for the Athens Paralympics. The 36 hours travel is a gruelling one for the horses and Dr. Doullittle became ill through the flight. "It was horrible and a nerve wracking experience", says Jan. "It was like he got travel sickness. In their travel area, they're unable to put their heads down and so mucus can't drain. That meant he just started to get more ill as the build-up of mucus increased. Thankfully, my coach, Gillian Rickard, sat with him through the rest of the travel and helped him through the ordeal. It was through Gillian's care that Dr. Doullittle was fit enough to compete"



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Jan Pike and Dr. Doullittle compete at the Athens Paralympics

The team's equipment and gear got lost in transit for two days, leaving them with only three days training leading up to the event. The team came in 6th place and Jan's confident that they'll achieve a higher position in the 2008 Paralympics to be held in Beijing.

Jan's involvement in RDA isn't just because of her love for horses. "On a horse I can feel what it's like to run. I glide and I can have better mobility than I normally would. On the ground I'm in a wheelchair and I'm constantly looking up to people. On a horse I have control of something powerful. On the scale of one to ten (one being the lowest, ten the highest), I would rate my Cerebral Palsy as a three, perhaps less some days. On a horse I'm an eight. I want to be doing this way into my seventies. As I get older my mobility decreases so riding is an incredible outlet for me. It's hard to describe so I'm just going to say that it feels like magic."

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Want to get involved in RDA? They always need volunteers but they also need people to be involved in fundraising as well. Many organisations like Lions and Rotary help out with raffles and fetes so if you would like to become involved then please contact RDA directly.

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