

Can competitive events have therapeutic benefits?

In the RDA Trustees Annual Report it reads, 'The focus of our work is to ensure that each individual has the chance to derive a direct therapeutic benefit and the opportunity to achieve their personal goal, whether that be learning a very simple skill or winning a major competition.'

We could simply argue that so long as that's what it says on the RDA tin, RDA should provide opportunities, including competitive opportunities, for any equestrian related activity RDA participants wish to experience. Of course this comes with some cautions such as, so long as suitable equines can be found, so long as we can ensure the rider is adequately trained for the activity and a safe environment available to host activities.

RDA's stance of saying, 'Why not?' is very much in accord with the values underpinning government consultations about a disability strategy for the UK, which are about helping people with disabilities realise their aspirations, increase their individual control and changing limiting attitudes and behaviours towards them.

People without disabilities are afforded the excitement of competition and it is only right that those with disabilities can compete within a fair classification system. Competition, properly supported, encourages people to push against limiting boundaries and be the best they can be.

Striving for mastery in riding, carriage driving, vaulting, show jumping and dressage supports improvement and preservation of physical functioning. However, good therapy also includes improvement in mental wellbeing and our own idea of who we are and what we can do. The Championships also offer elements in horsecare that promote learning and communication skills, arts and crafts that support self-expression, and musical rides that encourage teamwork and having fun. The competitive context offered at the RDA National Championships provides everyone with the choice to compete when they are ready and experience the stress associated with planning and preparation for public performance. This is good practice for many life situations. People say it is not the winning or losing but the taking part that counts; actually learning to cope with winning and losing are also important life lessons.

No one truly thrives as a human being unless they are exposed to a degree of risk. Overcoming obstacles helps us develop confidence born out of our proven competence and persuades us that if we persevere we will be equal to many tests to our ingenuity and resourcefulness. It is right that children and adults who use RDA can choose to compete at a large and inclusive event such as the National Championships. The term 'biotherapy' has been coined to describe the good effects of being out in natural surroundings; the RDA National Championships provides this, the chance to meet others with shared interests and potentially much more that also helps us succeed as individuals.

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