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Champion

Special horse honoured for the joy it brings to special riders

by Laura Lane, Herald-Times Staff Writer

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Navaar never sought the limelight, but the 25-year-old white and gray Arabian gelding will be center stage this weekend when he is recognized statewide for being the intelligent, gentle, patient and tolerant horse that he is.

Navaar, crushed eye socket and all, has been named the Therapy Horse of the Year by the Indiana Horse Council. He is spending Friday through Sunday in a special stall in the Hoosier Park West Pavilion at the Indiana State Fairgrounds, where he will be showered with gifts from other therapeutic riding programs around the state.

His fame will be short-lived, however. By Monday, he will be back at the People & Animal Learning Services (PALS) barn on That Road in Bloomington, giving rides to people with disabilities — building their confidence, making them smile.

"He will be on display; he will have fun; he will feel important for a few days and then get back to work," said his owner and PALS director Fern Bonchek.

Navaar has spent his life as a steady steed for children and adults learning to ride.

"He is old, but is very healthy," Bonchek said. "He acts anything but 25 years old. He's got spunk, some get up and go."

She explained that he fits the role of therapy horse perfectly. "A therapy horse has to be kind of born that way. They have to be calm, and be able to be handled by lots of different people."

She said Navaar, a horse her family owned, traded off and then got back, is deserving of his designation as Therapy Horse of the Year.

"The thing about Navaar that is so special is that you can watch him when you put a rider on that is a little bit more advanced, and he adjusts to their needs," Bonchek explained. "If you put a rider on that is slower and not as high functioning, he assesses the rider and meets those needs. If I ride him, he may look around and be kind of goofy because it's me."

He is dependable and senses the abilities of whomever may have the reins — Bonchek, who once rode him in jumping competitions, or a hesitant child with disabilities who climbs onto his back from a wheelchair.



Horse therapy rider Skyley Jessie, 7, laughs on board Navaar during a learning session. Staff photo by Monty Howell

Navaar has a horse's understanding, Bonchek said, of the struggles some of his riders work to overcome. In 2000, a tree fell on him during a thunderstorm, shattering his left eye socket. He didn't come at feeding time, so Bonchek's father went to find him.

"Navaar was covered in blood and the bone was sticking out of his head," Bonchek said. "The vet had to come out and do emergency surgery in our barn. She said that if he survived, the chance of him having vision in that eye was minimal. He wouldn't be able to blink, so the eye would not be healthy."

A nerve was severed, Bonchek said, and the left side of her horse's face was paralyzed.

The nerve grew back. He can blink. His vision seems unaffected.

"He overcame something himself, and it is a good story to tell the riders" Bonchek said. "He tore a muscle in his shoulder too, in that storm, and you can see the mark still. The riders know they have to be very careful around him, because if he ever bangs that eye again there's no bone there, nothing to protect it."

Her program owns nine horses and has two others on loan. Most are older, of the putting-out-to-pasture age, but find a new and important life as therapy horses. They go through three months of training that involves getting used to unstable riders and standing still while brightly colored balls are tossed to riders in the saddle.

"We are always looking for good horses. It's a great second career for them," Bonchek said. "They can do this and get a lot of pride for themselves and the riders. And they are loved and well-cared for."

PALS has 46 weekly riders, and a total of about 100 every year. Bonchek and trained volunteers give about 1,500 therapeutic riding lessons each year. PALS just started an occupational movement therapy program using horses, and also has an at-risk youth riding program that challenges teenagers.

"We had some that came the first day, and one of the smaller riders, I put on the biggest horse," Bonchek recalled. "She said, 'I am not going to ride that horse.' She was very reluctant. But I talked her into it, and she got off and said, 'Can I ride her again next week?' Her pride during the whole riding experience was great. By the last time she came, she was crying because she had to leave the horse."

The benefits to kids from the work she and Navaar do, Bonchek said, "you just can't beat."

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Horse fair

The 2005 Hoosier Horse Fair and Expo is Friday through Sunday at the Indiana State Fairgrounds.

Navaar, a therapeutic riding horse at PALS in Bloomington, will be honored this weekend with the Indiana Therapy Horse of the Year Award, given by the Indiana Horse Council's committee for equine assisted programs.

There will be three therapeutic riding demonstrations during the events at the Hoosier Park West Pavilion at the Indiana State Fairgrounds.

- 4 p.m. Friday
- 12:30 p.m. Saturday
- 12:30 p.m. Sunday

There will be horse shows and other events throughout the weekend.

COST: Advance tickets can be purchased at Marsh Supermarkets. \$10 for adults and \$3 for kids 7-12. At the door, tickets cost \$2 more. Kids 6 and under are free.

Helping out

PALS, Bloomington's therapeutic riding program, is holding a two-hour trail ride and walk-a-thon to raise money. It will be April 23 at Midwest Trails in Norman. Horses and humans on foot may participate. The cost is \$50 per person or \$50 in sponsorships. The fee includes continental breakfast, a PALS riding demonstration, lunch, a horse owners' workshop, a T shirt and door prizes.

Call the PALS office at 336-2798 for more information.

Registration materials also are available online at www.palstherapy.org



Navaar waits for his next rider with handler Kate Murphy. Staff photo by Monty Howell

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