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Care of the Older Therapeutic Riding Horse A Case Study

Caring for the older Therapeutic Riding Horse is a challenge faced by most Equestrian Centers with some of the challenges including having suitable facilities for retirement, increases in veterinary fees and the necessary staffing to manage individual needs amongst other challenges. How to manage the welfare of the older therapeutic riding horse after giving 20 years or more service is a scenario that all Therapeutic Riding Centers' face. This is the story of one such Therapeutic Riding Pony 'Prince' now aged somewhere between 28 and not really sure !!

About 12 years ago, whilst at the horse sales to buy a particular horse, we came across Prince who was in a dark part of the facilities looking quite thin and not very responsive to human interaction. We commented on this and moved towards the sales ring. The same pony came into the ring and was paraded around for viewing – with the auctioneer commenting on the fact that he had sweet itch – a disincentive to most buyers – in addition to his age cited as being 16. Yes – you've guessed right!. We bought him on humanitarian grounds not knowing what we would do with him. He was lifted into the horse box by two farmers as he was reluctant to load. And the rest is history really – as he turned out to be one of the best little riding school ponies ever. As he grew older, he was doing more private therapeutic riding sessions until this became his main job and this was working reasonably well for him and his many small riders.

However, over the past couple of years we began to notice a deterioration in Prince. Apart from his sweet itch which needs careful handling he was diagnosed with Cushings disease. In addition, he started to refuse to eat and lost quite a lot of weight. Though his teeth are quite worn down he still has them but they are regularly checked. Due to his weight loss he now gets 300 grms of senior mix each day and 4 feeds / 2 kg a day of fibre plus and 2 kg of steamed hay which has to be but up by hand!. What we do for Prince!!!!. For his Cushings he gets ½ a tablet daily and for his sweet itch an anti histimine injection each year as well as two different treatments each 6 months.....as well as wearing a fly sheet April to November and an outdoor rug November to March. And his bedding is peat to decrease the amount of dust that can be in shavings. A further difficulty we had was the loss of a pony with whom he had a strong social relationship which left him without company. Though he has since developed a relationship with another 'older Therapeutic Riding Pony' there was a gap in time.

Due to his sweet itch and being prone to laminitis it is not possible to retire Prince to what we call the retirement programme. And so Prince now works maybe 30 or 60 minutes a day with great attention paid to the rider profile and where he goes on the property as he does not really like leaving the arena to go through the fields or the sensory trail.

So today, Prince lives alongside the bigger horses so as that we can keep a very close eye on him. We are not sure how much longer he will be able to work or indeed co-exist with the other equines that live at Festina Lente – but he has given so much happiness to hundreds of children who come to Festina Lente – and no doubt lots before he came to live here – that we will pay the greatest attention to him until it's time to make the ultimate decision.