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he horse program is the unsung hero of The Putney School,” says Cara Snarski, athletic director and horse program manager.

The hero? Really? But isn't horseback riding dangerous or, worse yet, elitist because it's so expensive and carries the taint of upper class posturing? With such common misconceptions, it's easy to see why this story starts in a defensive stance. But it doesn't end there, so read on as Cara helps us dispel these myths and shows us why our horses are heroes.

Let's talk about safety. "A broken shoulder is the worst injury we've ever had from horseback riding at The Putney School," says Cara. That's quite likely because all riders wear helmets and boots, use safety stirrups that release in a fall, and ride in groups on mellow horses and well-groomed trails under the direct guidance of Cara or Els Ouden Kotte, who is assisting Cara this year, and the more experienced student riders. But for the occasional bees' nest or other unusual circumstance, that makes riding no more risky than, say, downhill skiing, lacrosse, soccer, mountain biking, rock climbing or washing the windows on the Reynolds building—all of which are offered at Putney.

Elitism is a little tougher to tackle, so let's start with the root of the matter: expense. "It's a unique opportunity for many students at a very good price," says Cara. Yes, the horseback riding afternoon activity has a \$200 fee. For students on a tight budget, that could be an insurmountable hurdle. But there is financial aid available for those who really need it. That does create an unfortunate line between those who can simply write a check and those who have to ask for help. The irony is that it costs \$192 to participate in the alpine skiing and snowboarding activity (ski pass and rentals). That money goes directly into the operating budget of Mount Snow. The \$200 activity fee for horseback riding offsets the expense inherent in caring for and feeding the animals. So where does this largely unspoken undercurrent of ill feeling come from? Nobody really knows, but maybe articles such as this one can help it go away.

It would be nice to offer horseback riding without an additional fee. Each of our 14 resident horses (five are owned by the school, five are "free leases" that we care for in exchange for their use, two belong to Cara and two are student-owned) eats roughly nine pounds of grain per day. Grain costs about \$9 per 50 lb. bag. So that adds up to over \$8,000 a year just to keep them fed. Add to that about \$1,000 in yearly vaccinations, other veterinary expenses and a monthly visit





Our Horses are Heroes

The Putney School's Horse Program


from the farrier to replace worn shoes and you can see where the money is going. But it's nothing an endowment from a horse-loving alum or friend of Putney wouldn't fix (hint, hint).

So much for the commercial: Here's the part about the heroes. "Riding is therapeutic," says Cara, "You have to learn how to locate and relax the tension in your body to properly control your horse." She says riding is a wonderful blend of physical balance, mental skill and emotional tension—probably something that all Putney School students could benefit from. A fair amount of peer-to-peer mentoring also goes on as students become adept and pass their discoveries along.

The horse program also teaches responsibility. Each afternoon of riding begins and ends with caring for the horses. Students groom, saddle and bridle their mounts before riding and unsaddle, unbridle, feed and water them afterwards. The horse barn, a sturdy post-and-beam structure built in 1990 with a grant from a fond parent, also provides six-day work jobs. Cara dispels yet another myth, "A.M. horse barn is just as hard as A.M. cow barn."

The horse program is popular among students, especially the predominantly urban-based foreign students who choose Putney for its rural setting. So it's not that price tag that prevents most students from participating. "The number of stall spaces in the barn determines the size of the program," says Cara, who typically rotates up to 20 students through two twice-weekly sections of the activity for six weeks in the fall and six more in the spring. The short time is a function of the outdoor riding season in Vermont that is limited, mostly for safety reasons, to April–November. "I'd love to have an indoor riding arena," says Cara. Such a facility would enable year-round riding, but would cost about \$70,000 to build.

So how does Cara know so much? This is her sixth year running the horse program, but she's never been a stranger to the horse program. A Putney native, Cara started hanging around the barn at age seven with a sister and a best friend. They cleaned stalls and tack when Ann Skillings ran the program for the whopping sum of \$5 per week. She moved on to grooming horses at shows in return for riding lessons, bought a pony for \$100 and started competing in eventing, dressage and jumping equitation. Cara graduated from UVM with a B.S. in animal science. She then filled in for Jill Noss, the horse program manager just before Cara's tenure, and was, by then, a fairly obvious choice to succeed Jill when she moved on.

Our horses may be heroes, but we think the horse program manager has an awful lot to do with the ongoing success of the program. Stop by and visit Cara at the horse barn when you're here. She's there at least twice a day, every day, all year. Or e-mail her at csnarski@putneyschool.org. 

Left to right:
Victoria Mitchell '05
prepares to climb
aboard Madonna.

Alexis Cataldo '04 on
Gracie and Victoria
Mitchell '05 atop
Madonna in the ring,
which has been refur-
bished, since this photo,
with better fencing.

Kristen Ayotte '04 poses
with her pal, Razz, who's
ready for dinner.