

DARTMOOR PONIES HELP TEENAGERS SUCCEED AT ONE OF THE UK'S TOUGHEST YOUTH CHALLENGES

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DARTMOOR PONIES GEORGE, LARK AND CHATTY HELP TEENAGERS SUCCEED AT ONE OF THE UK'S TOUGHEST CHALLENGES

LINK TO PHOTOS:

<http://malcolmsnelgrove.photoshelter.com/gallery/Fresh-Tracks-2016-Full-Res-JPEG/G0000iCf1P43Ea24/C0000Vz4RejAsw3>

Password:- Freshtracks2016Press

A ground-breaking project saw three Dartmoor ponies enable 16 teenagers with a range of challenging life issues from both mainstream and special needs schools to take part in the famous and gruelling Ten Tors Challenge on Dartmoor which took place on 7/8 May.

The event is regarded as one of the toughest challenges in the UK to be undertaken by teenagers. Four hundred teams of six face hikes of 34, 45 or 55 miles crossing Dartmoor's infamously difficult terrain over two days carrying all they need to complete their route and stay out over night safely, with a shorter one-day route for less able young people.

Ten Tors is organised by the Army; they approached registered charity the Dartmoor Pony Heritage Trust (DPHT) to provide additional opportunities for young people who face a range of life challenges on a day-to-day basis, to take part.

The DPHT already runs a highly regarded Equine Assisted Learning programme called 'Ponies Inspiring People', using Dartmoor ponies to help young people to overcome anxiety and gain resilience, self-belief and transferable skills for life.

Led by Dru Butterfield, it created Fresh Tracks specifically for the Ten Tors Challenge and students from Teign and Ivybridge Secondary Schools and a combined group from Ratcliffe and Oakland Park Special Needs Schools at Dawlish, along with teaching and support staff, DPHT volunteers and Moorland Guides, began training over eight weeks to prepare for the demanding ten mile trek.

Dru said: "Delivering Fresh Tracks has been an amazing team effort. The schools have made huge commitments to bringing students to training sessions, including weekend walks; the students and their families/carers have shown incredible determination and enthusiasm – we cannot praise them highly enough; and our volunteer guides and support team members have been invaluable.

"Photographer Malcolm Snelgrove has followed the entire journey with his cameras and enabled us to hold

every memory; our 'Fresh Tracks' t-shirts were given by Dewerstone Outdoor Living; much of the outdoor clothing was provided by Rohan, Gift your Gear and by friends, including the Army; and Stringer Equine vets have been there just in case."

The temperaments of the Dartmoor ponies, Skylark (Lark) and Stonechat (Chatty), loaned by volunteer Sue Parrott of Chagford, and the DPHT pony George, proved paramount. Typically stoic and gentle, but also tough and resilient, these are ideal attributes to support students.

One head teacher said: "The students have benefitted from the closeness, unconditional love and attention from the ponies. Their response has been very positive and they show resilience to new situations with skills that are transferable into everyday life situations."

An assistant head teacher added: "Two months ago, if I had suggested to these lads that we walk 10 miles across Dartmoor, they would have laughed at me, but in school we started to see a bit more enthusiasm, a bit more positivity and self control. Today they didn't just walk up and down the Tors of Dartmoor, they climbed mountains – in their minds - and came back asking to do it again."

A parent commented: "My son was frightened of even going out of the front door. Since working with the ponies, he is now able to walk the dogs, go to the local shop and hold a conversation with anyone we meet".

"The change is incredible: he is so much more confident and comfortable with life; he is taking responsibility for himself and getting prepared for the day ahead; he doesn't get so stressed and worried about every little thing that might happen. Our family life has improved so much you wouldn't believe", said another parent.

And from one student: "I love the ponies. I didn't think I could do any of this, I didn't want to do it. Now I don't want it to stop."

Lieutenant Colonel Peter Bates of HQ SW Region and the lead organiser for Ten Tors, said: "The Army firmly believes in providing opportunities for young people, which is one reason that we organise the Ten Tors event. We are delighted to be working with DPHT and to being even more inclusive through Fresh Tracks. These youngsters worked hard to get here and deserve the chance to shine, as well as gaining new skills and a real sense of self pride."

It is hoped that the 'Fresh Tracks' event can be extended and become a regular element of Ten Tors. Accessing the vast spaces and additional challenges that Dartmoor presents for students working with ponies is set to continue as part of the DPHT's 'Ponies Inspiring People' programmes; the results have been remarkable.

Photos:

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NB: Quotes are from family/school reps/students who are available for interview

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