



Beverli Rhodes credits the healing power of horses and the countryside for aiding her recovery after the 7 July London bombings.

# How horses can change lives

People who go riding for the very first time, and those getting back in the saddle after a tragedy, may find that horses can help them turn their lives around.

**Victoria Gray** speaks to some inspirational people who have discovered just that

## “I was told I’d never ride again after the 7 July bombings”

**O**n the morning of 7 July 2005, Beverli Rhodes was running a little late as she caught the tube to her work in central London. En route from King’s Cross to Russell Square station, a suicide bomber detonated an explosion on her Piccadilly Line train, costing 26 people their lives.

The explosion caused Beverli’s head to slam against a metal pole, leaving her with horrific facial injuries.

“I was just in the wrong place, at the wrong time, on the wrong train,” says Beverli, 47. “But because of that, I spent the next two years in and out of hospital.”

Before the bombings, Beverli had been a keen rider, with a special interest in Western riding. The July bombings left her unable to contemplate getting on a horse. “I couldn’t stand up properly, let alone ride,” she explains.

She was left with injuries to her face, jaw and left eye, requiring a series of operations. Her teeth became dislodged, and debris from the explosion caused infection in her face. She was unable to swallow properly for months, and her balance was badly affected. She still suffers from post-traumatic shock.

But Beverli was determined to get back to doing what she loved most.

“During my treatment, I told a professor of medicine at Kings College London that I wanted to go back to riding, and he said ‘you must be joking,’” says Beverli. “But I replied, ‘I’ve had horses in my life since I was five – and I need to have them in my life.’ It was thinking about riding again that kept me going through it all.”

### Finding a trainer

It wasn’t just months of operations, pain and trauma that Beverli had to contend with. When she finally felt able to make



tentative steps towards getting back in the saddle, she also faced difficulties in terms of finding a sympathetic trainer.

“Because I was registered disabled after the accident, it made it difficult to find an instructor who was insured to teach me,” Beverli explains. “Also, I was a veteran rider, not a beginner. I needed someone who understood that it wasn’t my knowledge that was lacking, the problem was the physical demands of riding.”

Finally, she found an American trainer who had plenty of experience teaching disabled riders. He had a horse called Peewee – “a lovely gelding, really sweet”, Beverli recalls – who was the perfect horse to reintroduce her to riding.

“I was told I needed to do months of riding bareback on the lunge, to learn how to sit and to balance again,” Beverli says. “So that’s what I did – spent seven or eight months just trying to find my balance.”

One of the reasons her doctor had been so reluctant to give her the go-ahead to ride again was the risk that Beverli could fall off and damage her face again. But she felt it was a risk worth taking.

“I used to be on 16 tablets a day, because my balance problems meant I felt constantly nauseous. When I started being able to ride

regularly again, I went down to just two tablets a day,” says Beverli. “I firmly believe that was down to the riding.”

### A new partnership

Having regained some of her confidence in the saddle on Peewee, Beverli began looking for a horse of her own. She found her perfect partner in Barely Whizable (pictured, left), a strikingly pretty mare who was imported here from the States. By then Beverli had moved to Kent.

“When Whizzi first arrived at the yard, I was too frightened to get on, so I asked a lady from the yard to ride her instead. I watched them walk, trot and canter, and by that time my legs had stopped shaking enough for me to get on. I was only able to be led round at a walk – and this was me, who used to do cross-country and loved galloping around,” Beverli adds.

They took things slowly, allowing their partnership to develop through groundwork, join-up and Parelli exercises.

“We did stuff together, so we could learn about each other,” says Beverli. “I would ride her bareback, and on a couple of occasions when I was riding, I blacked out. Both times, Whizzi stopped so I wouldn’t fall off. I think most horses can tell if there’s something wrong, and want to look after you.”

### Time to compete

Three years on from the London bombings, Beverli believes that horses have been a big part of her recovery process. She now feels able to compete in Western classes once more. “It’s been a long haul getting to this point, and only now do I feel confident enough again to compete, but it’s worth it.”

Whizzi in particular has really helped on that front. “The nightmares are still very real, even now,” says Beverli. “If I’ve had a particularly bad night, I’ll go to the stables the next day and tell Whizzi all about it – and her ears start going, so she’s obviously listening. I really do believe that horses are angels – they’ve certainly pulled me out of the depths of despair.”

## “I was going off the rails – horses helped me get back on track”

**W**hen ITV aired their latest series of *Ladette to Lady* earlier this year, sweet-natured but boisterous

19-year-old Nicole Hart stood out as a likely favourite early on. When the contestants in this year's programmes were sent for side-saddle lessons, Essex teenager Nicole was reminded of what she'd been missing out on.

“It was great to be back on a horse again,” says Nicole. “I didn't think much of it when we arrived at the stables, but when I was riding round, I was filled with this peaceful feeling.”

When she was just nine-years-old, Nicole was devastated to lose her elder brother. To help her cope with her grief, her aunt – who owns a livery yard – introduced her to riding.

Nicole took to it immediately, and was later bought Cloudy, a veteran pony. “She taught me everything I know,” she says.

But only two years later, another tragedy hit the family when Nicole's brother Lee also died. It was too much for her to cope with, and she began to go off the rails, experimenting with drugs and alcohol. In an attempt to help her cope, Nicole's parents bought her a new pony, Charlie.

“He was only 13.2hh, but he used to jump 4ft fences,” says Nicole. “For the first year I had him, it was fine, but then I stopped going down to the stables and stopped riding, and I'd pay friends to look after him instead.”

At 15, Nicole decided to sell her pony in order to pay for her drug- and alcohol-fuelled nights



Party girls: Nicole (far left) and her fellow contestants on *Ladette to Lady*. She has since transformed her life.

out. “Charlie was worth around £1,200, but I sold him for just £500,” she admits.

But this party lifestyle couldn't continue. Nicole had no job, she'd been thrown out of home because of her behaviour and was staying at various friends' houses, and felt she had no prospects in life. She decided to apologise to her parents, found a job as a

secretary – and then was invited to take part in ITV's *Ladette to Lady*.

The contestants in this year's series were described as “the biggest challenge yet”, and while Nicole took a while to settle into the regime at Eggleston Hall, she soon began to show marked improvement. When the *Ladettes* were sent for riding lessons, wearing some very smart gear from Toggi, Nicole's previous experience was obvious.

“Riding side-saddle was brilliant – though a lot more difficult than riding astride,” says Nicole, who got to keep some of the Toggi clothing from the show.

Having also outperformed her fellow contestants in the task, Nicole was later invited to compete in a turnout class at the Side-Saddle Association National Show at Addington, where she finished fourth. She was also crowned winner of the TV programme, where she gave a touching speech, apologising to her family and promising to move “onwards and upwards”. She has lived up to that promise.

“Since the show, I've been promoted at work and I'm riding again,” says Nicole. “I want to go travelling, but I'm saving up to buy my own horse.”

And she won't be selling this one in a hurry. “Charlie did go to a really good home,” she says. “But there isn't a day that goes past when I don't regret selling him.”

A riding task reminded Nicole what she'd been missing out on.



Joe Curtis has gone from non-rider to head lad in the space of just a few years.



## “I didn’t like school – now I have lots of qualifications”

Joe Curtis, 20, is head lad at Southill Stables in Wiltshire, and is quite rightly proud of achieving this position. Joe only started riding a few years earlier, and constantly struggled with learning during his school days.

“Me and school didn’t really get on,” he admits. “I always struggled with reading and writing, and probably wasn’t the best pupil there was.”

Having tried riding once, and hating it – “the horse was horrible” – Joe began learning to ride again at the age of 14. This time, he took to it immediately and kept asking for lessons. Within a year, he knew he wanted to make horses his career.

Joe embarked on the ‘14-16 year-old increased flexibility programme’ through Haddon Training, which specialises in horse and animal care qualifications. This meant Joe could start working towards his future career while still at school, and he began doing work experience at Southill Stables, which offers livery, training and breaking.

“I was probably a bit shy when I started,” Joe admits. “There were four women on the yard, and me! They gave me some stick.”

Continuing his training, Joe quickly progressed from doing his NVQ Level 1, all the way up to passing his Advanced Apprenticeship – the equivalent of two A-levels. Not bad for someone who always struggled with school and exams.



“When I started, I didn’t think I’d ever get to be in the position of head lad,” says Joe. “I’m definitely more confident now. And I really enjoy riding, especially when you get a nice horse!”

The future looks bright for this young man who raced through his qualifications and seems to be progressing equally quickly with this career.

“I’d love to own my own point-to-point horse to compete in the future,” he says. “And one day, I’d really like to own a yard of my own.”

## The fast track

The British Racing School in Newmarket was set up in 1983 with the purpose of training people to work in the racing industry. Some top jockeys have passed through its doors, including Seb Sanders, and the school has also set up the careers of countless young people.



● Ricky Alleyne, 18, (above) graduated earlier this year from the nine-week Foundation Course. Ricky comes from a non-horse background – he grew up in central Brixton in the middle of London. He learned to ride through the Ebony Horse Club, which provides riding for eight to 19-year-olds from Coldharbour Ward, Brixton, who would otherwise have no means of accessing the sport.

In the past three years, the British Racing School has seen three black people complete the foundation course, but Ricky is the only one who plans to use the training to become a jockey. He has now landed a job with top trainer Clive Brittain.

● Rachel Goodwin, 19, admits that school wasn’t designed with her in mind. She rarely attended, and left with no GCSEs. However, she always had a passion for horses and wanted to work with them.

Despite having no experience of racehorses, she taught herself how to ride before applying to the British Racing School. Having been initially turned down at interview, and being told to get some experience in a racing yard, she found a supportive tutor in the form of Breeders Cup-winning trainer Brian Meehan.

Since completing the course, Rachel’s hopes for the future are to become an apprentice jockey. “By finding racing, I feel I have turned my life around,” she says.

### Contacts:

- British Racing School: [www.brs.org.uk](http://www.brs.org.uk)
- Haddon Training: [www.haddontraining.co.uk](http://www.haddontraining.co.uk)