

BY PATTI SCHOFLEER

Sissy Rescu

Duty in Iraq taught the vet that his safety depended on hyper-vigilance, and his buddies depended on his intense focus as well. But when he came home, this constant state of alert disrupted civilian life and put a barrier between him and his family.

He is testing to see if a horse may help him find his way home. He stands in a horse arena surrounded by orange groves and seated between mountain ranges. Three horses are turned loose in the arena with him. One is a bay Arabian, Sissy. The others are her best friends, Chrome and Star.

Sissy is a war mare, serving her people as did her ancient sisters of the desert. But she partners with warriors and their families in contemporary battles — contending with the psychological landmines planted during military service: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury, anger, depression, addiction and grief. Today, instead of flying across desert dunes confronting tribal enemies, this purebred tackles the role of healer and therapist, mentor and educator.

In the large sand arena, the veteran watches Sissy (Buckingham Bey V x Profound LTD) peer over the arena fence, zeroing in on something in the orange grove. She's a prey animal and an Arabian finely tuned to her environment; she is alert to something. Her ears point toward the mountains.

The vet watches and recognizes himself, mirrored in Sissy's vigilance. She's alert, like him, undertaking the huge burden to protect her herd of Chrome and Star. But she is calm. The therapist asks how the veteran might be like Sissy, vigilant but calm, and he arrives at possible solutions such as deep breathing, healthier sleeping habits and meditation.

"The veteran saw first hand an animal experi-

encing what he was experiencing. The horse acted from instinct, without other issues and agendas interfering with her reaction. This directed him to his inner resiliency that will be healing in civilian life," says Julie Sardonia, licensed marriage and family therapist, founder and executive director of Reins of H.O.P.E (Human Opportunities Partnering with Equines) in Ojai, California.

In 2010, the Reins of H.O.P.E broadened beyond its service to at-risk youth and developed the H.O.P.E. for Warriors Program — unlimited, no-cost equine-assisted psychotherapy sessions for active duty military, veterans and their families.

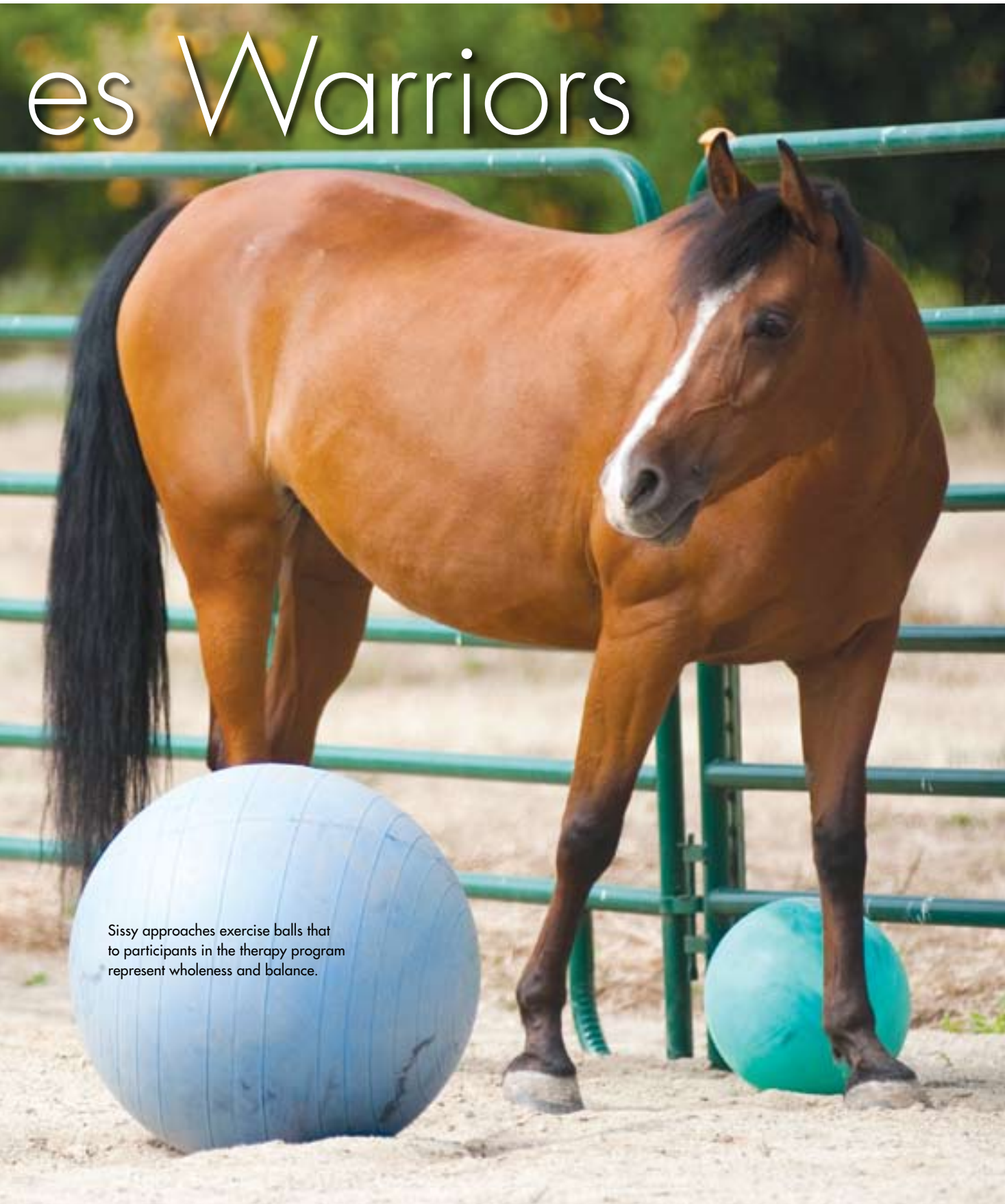
In operating the five-year-old program Julie is joined by Marie Ortiz, an American Riding Instructors Association (ARIA) certified instructor, and Lynn Dorgan, a licensed marriage family therapist. All three have master's degrees in psychology and are certified by the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) military services program.

"The horses mirror our emotional state and offer immediate feedback," Julie says.

Sissy is running around the arena. She flattens her ears and nips Star. The service member in the arena sees the anger in Sissy. He sees how her nonverbal language showed the anger within her. He comes to understand how he is perceived by his family when his anger, over what he had to do in Iraq, wells up. He realizes he is not communicating with his wife; he is yelling at her. He is determined to seek solutions.

The horses are not trained to demonstrate. Their work is not scripted. "Horses are so adept at communication and relationships. Through them we can show the commonality of what a herd is whether it is a family or work or school," Julie says.

es Warriors



Sissy approaches exercise balls that to participants in the therapy program represent wholeness and balance.

And the results are often jaw dropping.

A military wife and her two daughters evaluate Sissy, Star and Chrome, deciding which horse to work with. The mom was just married when her new husband deployed to Afghanistan. For the first time in her life she is living on base with children from both her and her husband's former marriages, and it's not easy.

Before they could announce their choice, Sissy walks up to the mother and circles her, two times. "I guess she wants to be part of our herd," she says. The therapist asks what she found interesting about Sissy. The mom noted that she is very calm, but assertive.

For this session, the arena is segmented with poles and marked with signs that describe the transitions the family is experiencing: moving, stepfather, military culture, and blended family. This exercise is called "equine billiards."

Without prompting, Star and Chrome lay down next to each other with their back to one of the segmented areas. Sissy stands facing them with her back to the arena fence.

The mother quickly describes Sissy as protecting them from what was outside the fence which did, in fact, include coyotes. "That's me," Mom says. "I'm protecting my daughters."

The marker by which the horses huddled reads "military culture."

This organic metaphor, produced by horse behavior, continues on. The family dad is a security officer assigned in Afghanistan to protect unarmed personnel. Like Sissy, he protects his herd.

"The power of equine therapy is that the horses can become anything you need them to be and it happens organically. They are catalysts for communication and processing," says Julie.

Sissy was born on the Starbucks Ojai Valley Ranch which is where Reins of H.O.P.E. horses are stabled.

She belonged to a four-horse string of Arabian performance show horses. The owner was thrilled to donate her in 2009 and to see her with a special job.

Sissy brings a feminine energy to the program. She walks into the arena with calm assurance: you feel the difference in energy that she gives to an activity. Clients peg her as feisty and beautiful, alert and oozing with personality. If she is not interested in you, she may be standoffish. If she is, she won't wait for a client to choose her — she does the choosing

Often times Sissy moves people down a path they once thought impossible or forbidden or out of character. Equine billiards and Sissy gave Navy SeaBee Sarah Long the discovery of new coping skills at an important time in her life.

Last January, after three years on active duty, Sarah had just returned to the Naval Base Ventura County from deployment in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa where SeaBees were on assignment building schools, digging fresh water wells and performing numerous humanitarian aid projects.

"I was going through a lot. I needed to get with someone to work things out and talk therapy wasn't working."

A rider when she was a teen, Sarah leapt at the chance to be around horses. However, to her surprise, when she arrived at the arena, she was quite nervous.

"I hit it off right away with Chrome. He's very supportive. If I have my back to him, he'll walk up and put his head on my back. One day I had been very upset about the medical stuff I'm going through since I'm back in the States. I was kind of emotional. First thing I did was start petting on Chrome. Well Sissy came up and ran him off. She was right in front of me and very interested in what was going on.

"I was not as comfortable with her because she is more high-spirited. She's the only one who hasn't had an injury,

and she has no physical limitations. She gets into a full gallop in the arena. You get bigger reactions from her than you do with the other horses."

This military person who has faced situations most horse people would consider much more daring than dealing with an Arabian mare found that Sissy took her out of her comfort zone and caused her to push beyond what she thought she could.

"I was so comfortable with Chrome that when I needed him to go somewhere, I just pushed him around. I tried to push Sissy around and she turned around and put her ears flat back at me."

Sarah had to figure out a different approach. Unbeknownst to herself, she mimicked what Sissy did to her that first day of their relationship. "I got in front of her and looked right at her. I stepped back a couple of steps, keeping eye contact — then she followed me. The way I did it I had asked her, not pushed her. I let her know 'I'm here, I'm headed this way and I need you to come with me.' And then she came."

These lessons boosted Sarah's confidence in her leadership and problem solving skills.

"My biggest challenge was asking for help. For me, asking meant I was failing. I hit my head against the wall trying to get the horses to do things. They're three times the size and they aren't going to do it if they don't want to. Finally I realized I couldn't do everything by myself. I had to ask for help and I had to explain exactly what I needed. This was huge for me."

Sarah has been coming almost weekly to H.O.P.E. for Warriors for nearly a year. "I have injuries I live with every day. But every time I go out there all that stuff goes out the window. I'll be in pain at work. I come out here and I feel better.

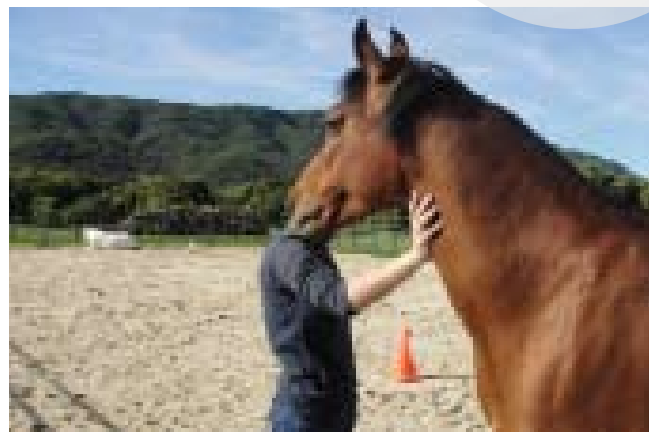
"It's hard to find a talk therapist

During a session with Navy Seabee Sarah Long, Sissy navigates around issues of loss. Mirroring Sarah she walks slowly and tentatively before going up to another horse for mutual grooming. To Sarah this represented getting "support". Sissy later becomes very alert and vigilant. At the end Sissy takes many deep breaths reminding Sarah how to calm herself as well as be in the present moment.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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that you click with. As soon as you meet the horses it feels like they understand you. They're awesome. They are always what you need them to be."

And Sissy is not without giving them a laugh or two.

Ten California Air National Guard officers from the Channel Islands base came to H.O.P.E. for Warriors seeking team building insights and experience. As a group they were challenged to build a pseudo-office from poles and buckets. They went all out, making a lamp, a desk, walls and a door.

No sooner did the officer for whom the office was built sit down at the desk than Sissy walked across the arena, went around the poles and quietly sashayed through the "door." She parked herself at the desk, right in front of the seated officer.

The men, outfitted in their fatigues,



looked quizzically at Sissy, as if to ask "Did that just happen?" Sissy returned the look as if to say "Thanks for the office. You did a fine job"

The metaphorical experience in which a horse gives immediate feedback, mirroring human emotions, allows the vets to experiment with behavior changes and the hope is that what they learn in the arena transfers to their outside lives.

Sissy is especially adept at the job because of her sensitivity and ability to reflect the good, the bad and the ugly of humans.

A man with frenetic energy walks

into the arena. Sissy trots away from him. He says she doesn't like me, she's leaving. The therapist asks what is it about your behavior that makes that happen. "I'm kind of hyper," he says. The therapist asks how do others react to you when you're like that? His answer is before him.

"Because Sissy mirrored his behavior and reacted as she did, he saw himself. It can go both ways. If they're nurturing and loving, she walks right up to them," says Julie.

Sissy has taught an at-risk 14-year-old about trust. She has shown an Iraq vet and his daughter ways that their reactions to stress have injured their relationship and led them on a path towards healing. She has shown a vet an alternative to drinking to calm his anger.

Her desert sisters would be proud. 🐾

Patti Schofler is a freelance writer, dressage competitor, show secretary, graduate of the USDF "L" judging education program, and the author of "Flight Without Wings: The Arabian Horse and the Show World."