Rylan Upton’s face radiates with pure joy as he rides his trusty steed, Scooter, around the ring. For Rylan, horseback riding is an adventure and an activity he looks forward to. But it is so much more than that.

Rylan has cerebral palsy with limited mobility on his right side, so he has struggled with balance and walking without falling. Hippotherapy (hippos is the Greek word for horse) is a treatment offered each summer through Mercy Rehabilitation Services that combines the movement of a horse with physical and occupational therapy.

Rylan was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at age 3, when he was noticeably developmentally delayed on the right side of his body. He wears a brace on his right foot and has been receiving occupational and physical therapy at Mercy for more than a year. His physical challenges, combined with his positive attitude, made him a perfect candidate for hippotherapy.

Karen Mauss, Rylan’s physical therapist at Mercy Rehabilitation Services, was trained in hippotherapy in 2000. She explains, “The goal of hippotherapy is to provide movement to the patient in order to increase his or her trunk strength. The horse movement is perpendicular to the patient; therefore, a side-bend of the horse results in trunk elongation in the patient.”

Rylan’s mom, Michelle, raves about the results. She says, “Rylan just carries himself differently since he started hippotherapy. He has better balance and posture and his gait is more even.

“Even the exercises we do at home from the therapist are more effective. I am grateful to Mercy for this opportunity because he’s had so much fun while improving his skills and gaining a higher level of ability. We saw positive changes after just two weeks. He had decreased tone and increased mobility and improved balance.”

A decrease in tone is a positive result, as it means there is a decrease in the tightening of the muscles in his right arm and leg. Loosening up these overly tight muscles has allowed improvement in his mobility.

Karen says, “Rylan is ambulating with improved trunk alignment following hippotherapy and has displayed improved core strength with his exercises.” Exercises include squats and other stretches intended to loosen up the tightened muscles that are a symptom of his cerebral palsy.

“The special thing about Rylan is he always has a good attitude about therapy. That says a lot about the staff. They create a great environment and he always wants to be there,” says Michelle. “The horse therapy took it up another notch. It was an adventure. We have seen lasting benefits, even in just the way he walks. He seems to be able to shift from right to left more easily. It isn’t perfect, but it has greatly improved. He is so much more independent.”

Mercy partners with Miracles in Motion, Swisser, to offer hippotherapy. Miracles in Motion volunteers assist with sessions by leading the horse and providing two specially trained side-walkers and an instructor while Karen conducts the therapy.