

# FEATURES

## Keyboard-playing therapy mini horse captures hearts

Greta Cross  
USA TODAY

Black Pearl isn't just any other mini horse. She is a 17-year-old keyboard-playing, attention-loving star.

Black Pearl, or Pearl to those who know her, is one of the nine mares that make up Mini Therapy Horses' team in California. Led by Victoria Nodiff Netanel, the nonprofit aims to provide support for hospital patients, first responders and schoolchildren through animal visits.

Recently, Pearl went viral on social media for a video of her playing an electric keyboard to a child waking up from anesthesia at Shriners Children's Southern California. Sporting her official therapy horse vest, Pearl ran her lips across the instrument keys, playing a loud range of notes. DJ and producer Diplo reposted the video with the comment, "Me working on next summer's anthem."

Nodiff Netanel founded Mini Therapy Horses in 2008 after years in competitive dressage. She missed working with horses and wanted one of her own. Cue Pearl.

"She was just going to be my companion at home, so I'd still have a horse in my life while I'm working. Because of all my own horse experience, I ended up training her to do all kinds of things, which I had no idea I could train her to do," Nodiff Netanel told USA TODAY. "She loved to learn so much, and I connected with her so much."

Initially, Nodiff Netanel didn't have plans for a trained Pearl. She knew nothing about animal therapy. But "at some point I got that light-bulb moment when you think, 'Wow, maybe I could combine my love of horses to helping other people,'" Nodiff Netanel said.

The first hospital system Nodiff Netanel worked with, and continues to work with 17 years later, was Veterans Affairs Greater Los Angeles Health Care. Nodiff Netanel said after a long process of proving her and Pearl's training, she was able

to visit hospital patients. Now, she and a mini horse stop by the VA every Monday, she said.

"Our miniature horses are greatly cherished by the veterans. Their presence helps to alleviate stress, enhance participation during sessions and increase alertness. They also motivate patients to engage more in conversations and offer a delightful and memorable experience," Dr. Blessen Eapen, VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System chief of physical medicine and rehabilitation service, told USA TODAY in a statement.

Today, Mini Therapy Horses keeps busy four to seven days of the week, Nodiff Netanel said. All its humans are volunteers. Along with hospitals, the organization visits Ronald McDonald's Houses, grade school and college students during the academic year and Los Angeles Police Department 911 responders.

Nodiff Netanel said she and one of the horses visits Shriners every other Thursday, often working with children in physical therapy. The mini horses don't just lift spirits but get involved in the care, too.

"The horses will do different exercises with them to achieve their goals. I've trained them to kick a ball back and forth ... and then the child can kick it back either with the prosthetic or with their remaining part of their limb before they get their prosthetic," she said.

The hospital staff sometimes calls their horse-tending patients cowboys or cowgirls.

Before purchasing a new mini horse, Nodiff Netanel said she spends time with the animal to see whether it has the right temperament. Some horses pick up skills quicker than others. But all the organization's horses are met with love and affection to get them desensitized to touches. Nodiff Netanel also creates loud stimuli, such as shaking a cup of rocks, to train the horses to be in loud, unpredictable environments.

## Born at 21 weeks, Iowa baby makes history as 'most premature'

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Iowa City Press-Citizen  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Just after midnight on July 5, 2024, Nash Keen was born at the University of Iowa Health Care Stead Family Children's Hospital. He arrived 133 days early, weighing only 10 ounces and defying all odds.

"We quoted (that Nash) had a zero chance of survival, because before him, no one had survived that young," said neonatologist Dr. Amy Stanford.

Instead, Nash just celebrated his first birthday – holding the Guinness World Record title as "most premature baby."

At 21 weeks gestation, a baby's vital organs – the brain, heart and lungs – are still developing. Most hospitals don't offer resuscitation until babies are 22 weeks. But on a "case-by-case" basis, the Iowa children's hospital does at 21 weeks.

"We offer what we call a 'trial of life,' because at 21 weeks, sometimes the babies are just too small for our smallest equipment," Stanford said.

For Mollie and Randall Keen, the decision was obvious. Six months before getting pregnant with Nash, the couple had lost their daughter, McKinley, at 18 weeks gestation.

Mollie has polycystic ovary syndrome, a disorder that can make it harder to get pregnant. After losing McKinley, she was diagnosed with an "incompetent cervix," a condition that causes the uterus to weaken and open too soon, often leading to preterm birth.

The couple saw their dreams of starting a family start to dwindle. Then came Nash.

At the 20-week scan, doctors noticed something alarming but familiar.

"I was already two centimeters dilated," Mollie said in a news release. "We were devastated. We thought we were going through the exact same thing, and we thought we were going to lose this baby."

She started having contractions two days later and was put on bed rest. When "heavy contractions" woke her at 2 a.m.,

the family rushed to Iowa City.

"At that point, I didn't know what I could do to turn things around," Mollie said.

Doctors delayed Mollie's labor for two days. Just hours after passing the 21-week mark, her intuition kicked in: "I had them check to see how dilated I was, and maybe a second later, I had a bunch of people in my room."

The team of doctors and nurses delivered Nash successfully, then handed him over to the neonatal intensive care unit, preparing for the worst.

"We all felt a rush of relief when we were able to get the breathing tube in because that meant that we could keep going," said Stanford.

The first day of Nash's life was a "flurry of activity." The NICU team worked to get IVs in his belly button and strategized ventilator support.

His blood flow was monitored by hemodynamics, the use of ultrasound to study blood flow – a specialty the University of Iowa has revolutionized in neonatal care. That allowed doctors to fine-tune care and maintain consistency, halving the risk of death or severe brain bleeding while stimulating the womb-like environment necessary for development.

The first few weeks of Nash's life were hard, interrupted by blood draws, medications, frequent scans and surgery for a perforated bowel.

Doctors "began to breathe a little easier" at the one-month mark and felt "confident that he had a real chance of going home."

Nash did so in January 2025 after 189 days in the hospital.

The 1-year-old is now a happy and giggly baby doing "remarkably well." The Keen family and doctors hope that by the time Nash is in kindergarten, "no one will know that he was born so early," Stanford said.

His story "is so much more than a Guinness World Record. It proves that impossible things that can be done," Stanford said. "(When) we work together and learn from every patient, we keep pushing boundaries."

"Nash isn't just a record breaker – he's a heart-stealer," Mollie said.

# America's fittest large cities revealed

Ken Alltucker  
USA TODAY

When measuring the nation's collective fitness, the good news is Americans are more likely to take a brisk walk, play pickleball or lift weights.

But this year's ACSM American Fitness Index ranking of the nation's fittest cities, published July 22, also found some worrisome trends: Air quality deteriorated and more people struggled to afford healthy, nutritious food.

The annual report, published by the American College of Sports Medicine and Elevance Health Foundation, ranks the nation's 100 most populous cities on personal and community health indicators. This year's report evaluated 35 indicators, including new categories like trail miles, splash pads and tennis and pickleball courts.

Arlington, Virginia, ranked as the nation's fittest city for the eighth consecutive year. Washington, DC, located across the Potomac River from Arlington, ranked second. Seattle, San Francisco and Denver came next.

The report ranked Oklahoma City at the bottom of the list. Lubbock, Texas; North Las Vegas, Nevada; Memphis, Tennessee; and Wichita, Kansas rounded out the bottom five.

People can view the report at acsm.org to see how their community fared on indicators such as public green spaces, access to parks, recreational areas, basketball hoops and bike lanes. The report also grades personal health measures such as obesity rates, fruit and vegetable consumption, mental health, sleep and smoking rates.

American College of Sports Medicine President Stella Volpe said the report is an opportunity for cities that don't rank well to study what higher-ranking peers do to give their residents a chance at improved health.

"We hope cities that don't fare as well may still be able to make some changes that help their citizens," Volpe said. "Let's just try to make our citizens as healthy as



People participate in a yoga class during the 23rd annual Solstice in Times Square: Mind Over Madness Yoga event to celebrate the summer solstice in New York City, June 20. ANGELINA KATSANIS/REUTERS

they can possibly be."

**Improved aerobic and strength measures**

The report said the nation overall did a better job of meeting aerobic thresholds.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that people get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity such as walking fast, riding a bike or mowing the lawn every week. People also should do muscle-strengthening exercises such as lifting weights or doing push-ups twice a week.

The 2025 report said 59.9% of Americans walked, biked, ran or otherwise met or exceeded the minimum aerobic activity recommendations – an increase of 9 percentage points from last year. Nationwide, 94 of the 100 largest U.S. cities had improved aerobic activity. Eighty-nine of 100 cities improved on a separate category that gauges both aerobic and strength activity.

The report cited decreased smoking rates and more funding for parks as contributors to big cities' overall health.

### Rising food insecurity

On the negative side, the report high-

lighted the troubling trend of rising food insecurity as inflation sent grocery prices higher and COVID-19-era programs that helped financially strapped Americans ended.

The percentage of people who reported food insecurity in 2025 increased to 12.9%, up from 10.4% the year before. Food insecurity is when people don't have or don't think they can get nutritionally adequate and safe foods.

Anchorage, Alaska, was the only top-100 city that didn't have a higher rate of food insecurity.

"That increase in food insecurity is something to be very concerned about," Volpe said.

Cindy Jordan, CEO and founder of Pyx Health, said many lower-income households have struggled to afford routine, healthy meals after losing health insurance coverage. Pyx Health contracts with health insurance companies to arrange food, transportation and other services mainly to people on Medicare and Medicaid.

During the pandemic, states suspended routine eligibility checks for Medicaid to ensure low-income families' access to health care wasn't disrupted during the crisis. The Biden administration resumed those eligibility checks nearly two years ago. As of 2024, nearly 1 in 4 Medicaid re-

cipients who were disenrolled when states resumed eligibility checks remained uninsured, according to a KFF survey.

More families could face food insecurity under President Donald Trump's new tax cut and spending law. As many as 22.2 million Americans could lose some or all of their Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits under the law, according to an Urban Institute analysis.

Jordan, who was not involved in the ACSM report, said eliminating food assistance could worsen the nation's chronic health epidemic. People will skip preventive care until they end up in a hospital emergency room.

"If you don't eat healthy food, the cost to the health system is dramatic," Jordan said. "That's exactly what we want to avoid."

**Wildfires, air quality and mental health**

The nation's air quality worsened over the last year.

The 2024 edition of the report said residents of the nation's largest cities could count on good air quality nearly 2 out of every 3 days. But fewer than half the days were clear over the past year, ACSM's 2025 report said. Smoke from wildfires across several Canadian provinces traveled south and worsened air quality for millions of people in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions.

Poor air quality can trigger coughing, wheezing and asthma and contribute to heart and lung disease, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

The combination of poor air quality and rising food insecurity could have contributed to a 2% drop in the share of people who described themselves to be in excellent or very good health.

The report also tracked the percentage of people who described poor mental health in the past month. About 44.9% of people said they recently had poor mental health, barely changed from last year's figure of 44.7%.