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Cory on the upswing

Second stint of dolphin therapy helps Marne boy's progress in face of rare brain disorder

By JONATHAN QUILTER
Advocate Photographer

When 4-year-old Cory Ryan returned home recently after two weeks of dolphin therapy in Florida, the first thing he wanted to do was go to bed.

With mom watching proudly, he marched cautiously to his bed, pulled back the blankets, crawled sleepily into place and laid down his head.

Through her eyes, this was another sign of progress: an indication of Cory becoming more independent and exceeding the limitations of a rare brain disorder that has stymied his physical and verbal development almost since birth.

During the first three years of Cory's life, Bobby and Susie Ryan were used to seeing improvement every six months or so, but now it's practically constant.

"It's been steady progress," Susie said. "It's like every week you can almost say he's doing this now, he's doing that now."

They watch with joy as Cory makes eye contact with familiar faces and recites the names of his brothers and the family dog. He points to a toy car and says, "more play," communicating his wants with language instead of frustration. He voluntarily takes several steps at a time and routinely waves and squeals "bye!" when friends or family leave.

Most of his advancement is due to a loving family who treat every daily task as a chance to learn.

"He gets no rest. We try to turn everything we do with him into something — making him talk or making him walk or making him learn something," Susie said.

But some of the credit, the Ryans believe, belongs to dolphins.

Last August, the Ryans visited Island Dolphin Care in Key Largo, where Cory underwent dolphin therapy. Then in June, Cory returned.

For two weeks, the dolphins, therapist Deena Hoagland, Cory's parents and two of his teachers from E.S. Weiant School, Amy Samson and Kristen Wells, worked with Cory on saying more words and encouraged him to take more steps



Four-year-old Cory Ryan swings with his mom at their home in Marne. The Ryan family recently returned from Key Largo, Fla., after Cory's second experience with dolphin therapy. (Jonathan Quilter, *The Advocate*)

on his own.

The unique experience is believed to give Cory and other children like him more motivation to try new things and to take chances.

Tears welled up in Samson's eyes on the first day of therapy, as she watched the interaction between Cory and the trained dolphins, she recalls.

"It was amazing to see the determination of Cory," she said.

"Before he would get in the water, he would have to say, 'in water, please.' We really worked hard on more than just one word. That was our goal. We wanted him to say more than just 'please,' or 'in.'"

After meeting that condition, Cory was allowed in the water to experience the gentle strength of the dolphins. With graceful precision, the intelligent mammals stimulated Cory by rubbing against his hands and feet and allowing him to grip their dorsal fins and go for a ride.

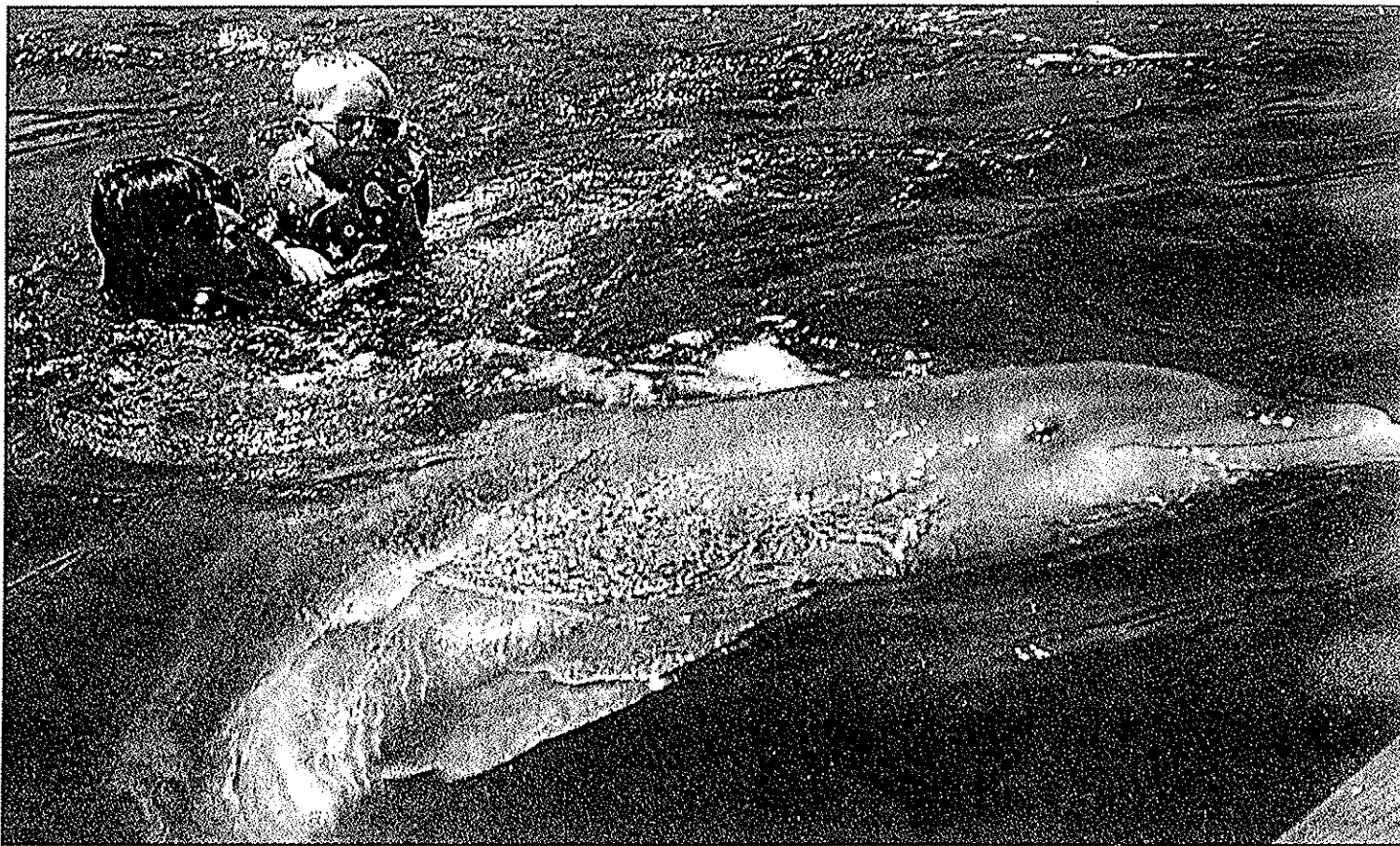
The most noticeable advance for Cory was his consistent use of three-word sentences like "eat more please," "play more please," and "purple ball please."

His tendency is to repeat words spoken to him, but he also has increased his vocabulary to a point where spontaneous speech is

Please see Cory/3A

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— Deena Hoagland
Island Dolphin Care



Dolphin therapist Deena Hoagland hangs on to Cory Ryan as they get a ride from Fonzie, a trained dolphin at Island Dolphin Care in Key Largo, Fla., during their visit earlier this summer. (Photo courtesy of the Ryan family)

Cory

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becoming more frequent.

Hoagland credits Cory's overall accomplishments to many factors.

"The teachers he has had, his family and probably his dolphin experiences have all contributed to his achievements," Hoagland said in an e-mail message to The Advocate.

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promising than ever. His family is continually setting new goals and trying new ideas to help Cory reach his potential. Bobby and Susie plan to enroll in sign language classes to help Cory communicate.

"What we're finding is, everything that he's learned to sign, he has learned to say," Susie explained.

"Continued progress is what we're hoping for," she said. "I'd like to hear him talking in full sentences and see him run

Cory's condition

Cory's parents, Bobby and Susie Ryan of Marne, were told four months after their son was born in 1994 that he had agenesis of the corpus callosum, and hydrocephaly.

ACC is a rare disorder where the band of nerves that joins the two hemispheres of the brain does not form during the prenatal period and will not grow later. Hydrocephaly means excessive fluid surrounds Cory's brain.

Fewer than one in 1,000 children are born with ACC, and the disorder has no medical treatment.

Cory's prognosis is unknown. From the time of the diagnosis, he began physical and occupational therapy. Cory also has worked with a speech therapist.