Special Dressage

Dressage is part of an international program for athletes with intellectual disabilities

BY AUDREY PAVIA

WINNING WAYS: Chelsea Thorn of New Zealand won two gold medals—including dressage—at the 2015 Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles
No dressage competition is more elite than the Olympic Games, where the finest horses and the most talented riders demonstrate their skills for the world. But another international dressage competition also takes place every four years, featuring riders who have overcome incredible disadvantages in order to compete in this sport at a high level.

That competition is the Special Olympics World Games, which features equestrian events requiring many of the same skills seen at the Olympic Games. The difference is that these athletes struggle with intellectual disabilities that often limit them in certain aspects of life. Physical activity is one area in which they can succeed, however, with equestrian sports high on the list. (See “Special Athletes” below for more.)

Special Olympics offers several equestrian sports, including working trail, English and stock-seat equitation, Prix Caprilli, showmanship, gymkhana, drill team, and dressage. The 2015 Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles included dressage, working trail, English equitation, and gymkhana team relay (see “A Golden Event” on the facing page for more on the competition).

Dressage, Special Olympics Style

Unlike some other Special Olympics equestrian events, “dressage in Special Olympics is for independent riders only,” says Bryan McQueeny, equestrian competition manager for the 2015 Special Olympics World Games and executive director of Ride on Therapeutic Riding in Chatsworth, CA. “This means that no one who needs a leader or side walker for support competes in dressage.”

Dressage at the Special Olympics is based on Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) rules, with some important differences. Similar to the classification system used in para-equestrian dressage, dressage Special Olympians are categorized at different levels, depending on which gaits they choose to show. A-level competitors ride walk-trot-canter tests, while BI-level riders show walk and trot. CI-level tests are walk-only. According to McQueeny, the Special Olympics Canter test is roughly equivalent to USDF Introductory Level Test C.

Special Athletes

In 1962, Eunice Kennedy Shriver (1921-2009), sister of then President John F. Kennedy, started a camp for children with intellectual disabilities at her home in Potomac, MD. The idea that was born of that camp—that people with intellectual disabilities should be able to participate in competitive athletic activities—led to the first International Special Olympics, held in Chicago in the summer of 1968. About 1,500 athletes from the US and Canada took part in the one-day event, which was produced as a partnership between the Kennedy Foundation and the Chicago Park District.

It wasn’t until 2003 that the Special Olympics were held outside the US. That year’s Special Olympics World Games, as they had come to be known, took place in Ireland. Since then, World Games are held every four years on a schedule like that of the Olympic Games, with summer Games and winter Games staggered two years apart. The World Games program now includes more than 32 individual and team sports.

To compete in Special Olympics, a person must have an intellectual disability and be eight years of age or older. Participation is free, although family members must pay their own way to attend. The World Games rely heavily on volunteers, who serve in roles ranging from coaches to assistants who help set up equipment for competition.

As at Olympic Games, World Games athletes represent their nations in competition. In the US, Special Olympics local competitions are held around the country, with successful athletes advancing to the state level. World Games participants are typically chosen from these competitors.

The 2017 winter Games will take place in Lebanon. At press time, the 2019 summer Games host country had not yet been determined. Learn more at specialolympics.org.
In Special Olympics dressage, the judging places more emphasis on the rider than the horse. The rider is evaluated for balance, seat, use of aids, ability to follow directions, ring etiquette, and safety and sportsmanlike conduct. He or she is expected to be well balanced in the saddle, sit deeply, and smoothly absorb the movement of the horse.

Most Special Olympics tests are held in a small dressage arena (20 x 40 meters), although a standard (20m x 60m) arena is sometimes used. Competitors are expected to ride accurate circles, ride into corners, execute diagonal lines, turn onto and off of the center line, and salute the judge.

Just as in standard dressage, the judge awards each movement a score on the 0-to-10 scale. Three collective marks then evaluate the rider’s position, seat, and balance; correct and efficient use of aids; and ability to keep the horse moving forward, coupled with calmness and overall presentation of the test.

Matching Horses and Riders

In traditional dressage, riders spend considerable time training their horses before they set foot in the show arena. Special Olympics equestrians know no such luxury, meeting their mounts just two days before the competition.

“Special Olympic riders deserve a huge amount of respect,” says dressage trainer and Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship-certified instructor Lisa Scebbi, who operates Diamond Elite Equine in Norco, CA, and volunteered at the 2015 World Games. “They are assigned a random horse for the competition. Usually, they have two rides on it and then have to compete. Can you imagine being in that position with a new horse—riding a dressage test and representing your country? Pretty huge.”

Horses used in Special Olympics World Games are on loan from individual horse owners, and each is carefully chosen for its combination of skills and disposition. For the 2015 Games in Los Angeles, horses were sought via phone calls, e-mail messages, and magazine advertisements, according to McQueeny.

“We recruited horses that were as close as possible to perfect in every way, from local riding schools, dressage trainers, and adult amateurs,” he says. “Several of our instructors went from Santa Maria to San Diego to try as many as possible of the eighty or so horses we used. Many of these were retired show horses and mounted sheriff’s horses. A very few horses got to come on their resumes alone.”

The horses were then matched with riders, based on the horses’ abilities and temperaments and the riders’ physical stature and abilities.

“We had approximately twenty minutes to have each rider try the horse we had matched to him or her, using
height, weight, and information from the rider’s coach,” says McQueeny. “Then the rider and coach could accept the horse or decide to try another.”

Many owners came to the tryout sessions as volunteer grooms to take care of their horses, McQueeny says. “We could never have done it without the help of these generous folks, who not only gave us ten days of their time, but also lent us one of their most precious gifts—their horses,” he says.

Of the 85 horses recruited for this year’s Special Olympics World Games, 65 were used for the dressage competition.

Memorable Games

Those who have attended a Special Olympics World Games attest that it’s a moving and inspiring experience.

“You get goose bumps watching the competition,” says Scebbi. “Regardless of the disability, these riders are so honored to represent their country. They are all focused and determined to make their family, friends, and country proud. It is a beautiful thing to see them ride their dressage tests.”

Audrey Pavia is a freelance writer and the author of seven books on horses. She lives in Norco, CA, with her two dressage-trained Spanish Mustangs, Milagro and Rio.