What Makes a Good Para-Dressage Horse?

Para-dressage runs parallel to "able-bodied" dressage in almost every aspect. When it comes to selecting a horse, is there any difference between the two disciplines?

By Elizabeth Moyer

Hope Hand, who rode for Team USA at the Sydney 2000 Paralympics, recalls those Games' opening ceremony vividly—not only for its dramatic display of 50 galloping horses, but also because some of those horses later resurfaced as mounts for the para-equestrian dressage competition.

DOING DOUBLE DUTY: The Trakehner stallion Lord Locksley has competed successfully at Grand Prix dressage with an able-bodied rider. He also competes as a walk-only Grade I para-dressage mount with rider David Botana.

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In the early days of Paralympic Games dressage competition, riders faced the luck of the draw, riding borrowed horses provided by the host country. They were given only a few days to practice with the unfamiliar horses before competition began.

Athens 2004 were the first Games at which para-dressage athletes got to compete on their own horses, and the sport has progressed from there to a level that is becoming truly "parallel" to its able-bodied counterpart. Nowadays, elite-level para-dressage riders might bump into the likes of US dressage Olympians Robert Dover or Laura Graves while looking for their next mount, says Hand, of Newtown Square, Pennsylvania, who now serves as president and executive director of the United States Para-Equestrian Association (USPEA), the US Equestrian recognized affiliate association for the para-equestrian discipline. That's the level of horse that today's para-dressage riders need to be competitive on an international scale.

Para-equestrian dressage, a *Fédération Equestre Internationale* (FEI) discipline, is dressage for riders with physical disabilities. The term "para" refers to the sport's being parallel to its able-bodied counterpart. But when it comes to the equine part of the equation, we wondered whether there are differences between what's desirable in a para-dressage horse and what able-bodied riders are looking for. Here's what experts had to say.

Shopping in the Same Market

"There's not much difference, although people might think there is," says Michel Assouline, the French-born US Equestrian Federation national para-equestrian dressage head of coach development and technical advisor. However, he says, since equestrian sport's addition to the Paralympic Games program in 1996, the type of horse needed has evolved.

"Before that, you were talking probably more of a 'therapeutic' type of horse, where people were looking for a horse with a very good temperament, good stability, good ridability," Assouline explains. "But that's all changed in the last 15 to 20 years."

Today, he says, a para-dressage horse must be equal in quality to a dressage horse. The international standard has become so high that anything less isn't sufficiently competitive, and "people are looking for that horse that's going to give them a gold medal."

The result is that "there really isn't any such thing as a para-dressage horse," according to Hand. "When we go horse-shopping, we are all shopping in the same market, and we all want the same qualities of [good] movement with a sane mind. It's really no different than able-bodied. We need the FEI [quality] walk, trot, and canter with a great disposition, and that's eye candy for anybody, really."

What's more, not only do top para-dressage prospects hold equal appeal for able-bodied competitors, but top para-dressage athletes themselves also may "cross over" to the able-bodied divisions, Assouline says.

"Our Grade IV and V [athletes], if they're on the Paralympic team, should be quite competitive with amateur able-bodied dressage riders," says Hand, referring to the FEI's system of classifying para-equestrians according to level of physical disability in order to level the competitive playing field. Grades range from I to V, with I designating athletes with the highest degree of impairment and V, the least.

"It's tough, but some of them are so good, they are right up there against the top people—able-bodied dressage riders, too," says Assouline.

Top Qualities

On the list of desired qualities in a para-dressage horse, two things stand out.

"What we need first and foremost for those horses is really temperament

and natural ability," says Assouline. Specific requirements may vary depending on the rider's type and degree of impairment.

Some horses seem to know intuitively when a rider has special needs, says Hand: "They become more attuned and patient to the para rider and behave themselves—more so than they might with an able-bodied rider really pushing them along."

For herself, "I like a forward horse, and a lot of our riders do," says Hand. "If we don't have the use of our legs, we need something that will willingly accept the bridle and move forward so we can concentrate on everything else…because you can't be nagging a horse around the arena with your whip." But "somebody with strong aids and strong leg aids or hands or seat may want more of a lazy-type horse."

Gaits are another priority in the para-dressage horse. The lower the rider's grade, the more paramount the walk becomes. In Grade I, the tests are walk-only.

Para-dressage horses "have to have great paces," says Assouline: "very correct, with some expression and perfect regularity."

Assouline also likes to see natural balance and suppleness. "If the balance isn't there, a clever, skilled dressage rider might be able to address that quickly, but it's going to be harder for a physically weaker para rider," he explains.

In addition to a quality walk, para-dressage riders might look for a horse whose trot is easy to sit.

"The lower grades normally can't post to warm up, and it might be a little bit harder for them to be flexible in their pelvis to get a good sitting trot," says Hand, "so they look for a good, smooth trot if possible that still has animation and forwardness."

Para-Perfect Partnership

Matching a horse to the right rider is always important, but it's even more so when the rider is a para athlete, according to Assouline.

WHAT EVERYBODY WANTS: The Hanoverian stallion Solitaer 40 (Sandro Hit x De Niro), ridden by co-owner the para-equestrian Kate Shoemaker in the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games, has assets any dressage rider would find appealing

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"With a para rider, especially in the lower grades," he says, "you have to be careful about the temperament of the horse, so that's something where we tend to take more time. When I'm not sure, I would have the rider try the horse several times, possibly try the horse in different environments—not just at home or where the horse is being sold from, but make an agreement that the horse can be taken to a local show so that we see what the horse does in a different environment—because that's usually where problems can start."

A kind and tolerant temperament may help the para-dressage horse to be a good performer, "but it's also first and foremost for [rider] safety," Assouline says.

Some para-dressage athletes use adaptive equipment to help them compensate for physical deficits. For example, an athlete may need to use two whips, or special rein grips, or a modified saddle. According to Hand, most horses adjust well to the differences.

"For the most part, they learn to adapt and accept the different aids," she says. "You get good at detecting which horses you think will come around and work with you. It's just a question of them bonding with the rider, just like any other rider bonding with their horse. It's amazing how flexible horses can be."

Typecasting

In para-dressage, as in able-bodied dressage, warmbloods tend to rule.

"Usually a nice warmblood is what we all gravitate toward," says Hand. "The judges are partial to that type of horse."

That's not to say that other breeds can't do well in the para-dressage arena. Hand points to NTEC Richter Scale, a Shire cross owned by current US Equestrian national para-dressage *chef d'équipe* Kai Handt. With the late Jonathan Wentz, the gelding earned a spot on the US team at the 2012 Paralympic Games in London and finished fourth in the Grade Ib Individual test and fifth in the Grade Ib Freestyle. That same year, NTEC Richter Scale was also a finalist for USEF Horse of the Year.

Assouline professes no preference for specific breeds, age ranges, or gender. It's the same as in able-bodied dressage, he says: If the temperament and talent are there and the horse is a good match for the rider, then those details are less important.

There are numerous mares in para-dressage, and several stallions have been successful, as well, Assou-

NONTRADITIONAL BREED, SPECTACULAR RESULTS: Great Britain's Anne Dunham (with then British para-dressage team coach Michel Assouline) won multiple medals at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games aboard the Knabstrupper stallion LJT Lucas Normark

line notes. With rider Anne Dunham, LJT Lucas Normark, a striking spotted Knabstrupper stallion (Ravaldi x Pallex Af Ulstrup), brought home team gold and two individual silver medals for Great Britain at the 2016 Rio Paralympics. (Assouline was the British para-equestrian dressage program's head coach at the time, a position he held for 13 years before coming to work for US Equestrian.)

"He was impeccably behaved; you would never have known he was a stallion," Assouline says of Lucas Normark. "I believe a good horse [can be any] sex or color. That horse—that stallion—is a really good example of that."

Another stallion currently making his mark in the para-dressage arena is the 2001 Trakehner Lord Locksley (Unkenruf x Enrico Caruso), ridden by aspiring Paralympian David Botana, 17. Lord Locksley is not only a stallion but a successful Grand Prix-level dressage competitor under Susanne Hamilton, Botana's trainer.

"The horse now does a wonderful job with him as a walk-only rider," Hand says of Lord Locksley. "It's quite incredible how these horses just can switch roles like that."

And age, as they say, is just a number. At the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games in Tryon, US para-dressage team member Roxanne Trunnell took the individual bronze medal in the Grade I Freestyle aboard Dolton, a Hanoverian gelding (Danone I x Londonderry) who was just six years old at the time.

"We were all kind of holding our breath that he could hold it together [in the WEG atmosphere], which he did; he's a wonderful horse," says Hand. "It's amazing how he does with her, and how he wants to frolic around when he's with the trainer. So it just shows you that [the horses] know for some reason how to take care of their rider, and what role they are playing at a certain time."

(Trunnell/Dolton and Botana/Lord Locksley recently finished one-two in the 2019 Adequan®/US Equestrian Federation Para-Dressage CPEDI3* National Championship; see page 12 for our report.)

Finding the Unicorns

Even though both para-dressage and able-bodied dressage riders are looking for the same elusive qualities in their mounts, there may be differences in terms of a horse's level of training and ultimate potential that helps steer it toward one discipline or the other, Assouline says.

"In para-dressage," he explains, "the highest level we compete at, in the Freestyle Grade V, is equivalent to Prix St. Georges. It opens the door more [for para-dressage horse-shoppers] because sometimes a para rider can acquire a dressage horse that might not have the potential to be a Grand Prix horse. Maybe it hasn't got a talent for piaffe or passage or whatever, but it would still have to have impeccable gaits—a super walk, trot, and canter—to be competitive enough."

Similar to the career trajectories of many upper-level dressage horses, which "step down" to become young-rider or junior mounts when the demands of the Grand Prix become too much for them, para-dressage can offer new options to talented dressage horses.

"Sometimes horses have reached their maximum in dressage," says Assouline, "but then you find they have a second career for a para rider, at a level that sometimes is less hard for them, less stressful, and that they enjoy. Instead of being completely retired, they can enjoy a less-demanding life at a lower level for a para rider."

(This is where Assouline puts in a plug for the US Equestrian para-dressage program as a soft landing place for such horses. He asks "anybody in dressage [with] a horse that might have reached the top of its career…but could still be good for a para-dressage rider" to contact US Equestrian's director of para-dressage programs to learn about options.)

As Team USA gears up for this year's Paralympic Games in Tokyo, finding more international-quality para-dressage mounts is top of mind for Assouline.

"We have good team members for the moment, but we still need more depth, so that means we need more horses," he says. "I think we have the riders, but we still need a couple more horses to be really safe and have proper backup. But so far it's looking good."

Assouline, a veteran high-performance dressage competitor himself, makes a case for supporting the horses and riders of para-dressage as an endeavor that goes beyond the quest for medals.

"Dressage is a sport that is very often for the elite," he says. "Para-dressage is a sport, but it's also a cause that aims at giving people a better life."

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