

Dreams Come True at 2012 Paralympic Games

Mostly rookie US team looks to the future

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TEAM USA: Chef d'équipe Missy Ranshousen (left) with riders Jonathan Wentz, Dale Dedrick, Rebecca Hart, and Donna Ponessa

Editor's note: As this issue was going to press, we were deeply saddened by the news that 2012 US Paralympic dressage competitor Jonathan Wentz had died. The USDF extends its condolences to Jonathan's family, friends, and many supporters. We'll publish a complete obituary in next month's issue.

The Paralympic Games, the quadrennial competition for athletes with physical disabilities, have traditionally taken a back seat to their big brother, the Olympic Games. But in London 2012, Paralympic dressage drew sell-out crowds to the equestrian venue at Greenwich Park; and these Paralympics were generally considered to be the ones that launched para-athletic competition into the mainstream.

Held August 29-September 9, commencing a little more than two weeks after the Olympic Games closing ceremony, the 2012 Paralympics followed in the Olympics' footsteps in several ways. As with the Olympics, the Paralympics drew praise for the venues and the organization. And as with the Olympics, in the realm of horse sport, the host nation proved unstoppable.

Gold for Team GB

Seventy-eight horse-and-rider combinations competed for team medals and individual medals in FEI para-equestrian dressage in London. The para-equestrians compete in grades (divisions) according to their levels of disability; each of the five grade levels (Ia, Ib, II, III, and IV) awarded both individual and freestyle medals. (For more on the grades, see "Para-Equestrian Grades Explained" at right.)

Team Great Britain (Sophie Christiansen/Janeiro 6, Deborah Criddle/LJT Akilles, Lee Pearson/Gentleman, and Sophie Wells/Pinocchio) won Paralympic gold with a team total of 468.817. Team silver went to Germany (Hannelore Brenner/Women of the World, Britta Napel/Aquilina 3, Angelika Trabert/Ariva-Avanti, and Steffen Zeibig/Waldemar) with 440.970. Ireland (Eilish Byrne/Youri, James Dwyer/Orlando, Helen Kearney/Mister Cool, and Geraldine Savage/Blues Tip Top Too) won the team bronze medal with 428.313.

Team USA finished seventh with a total score of 417.528. The team members were:

Dale Dedrick, 56, Ann Arbor, MI, riding her Hanoverian gelding, Bonifatius

Rebecca Hart, 27, Unionville, PA, riding Lord Ludger, a Holsteiner gelding owned by Jessica Ranshausen



TEAM GOLD MEDALISTS: *Sophie Wells, Lee Pearson, Deborah Criddle, and Sophie Christiansen of Great Britain*

Donna Ponessa, 51, New Windsor, NY, riding Western Rose, an Oldenburg mare owned by Wesley Dunham

Jonathan Wentz, 21, Richardson, TX, riding Richter Scale, a Shire-cross gelding owned by Kai Handt.

Accompanying the US Paralympic equestrian to London were *chef d'équipe* Missy Ranshausen, Unionville, PA; US Equestrian Federation employees Jim Wolf (*chef de mission*) and Pam Lane (team leader), both based at Gladstone, NJ; and team veterinarian Stacey Kent, VMD, Cochranville, PA.

Para-Equestrian Grades Explained

The International Equestrian Federation (FEI) classifies para-equestrians into five grades, or levels of disability: Ia, Ib, II, III, and IV.

Grade Ia riders are mainly wheelchair users with impairment of all four limbs. They may be able to walk with an unsteady gait, but balance is severely impaired. The Grade Ia team and individual tests are walk-only, but the freestyle may include lateral work and trot work.

Grade Ib is similar to Grade Ia, but all tests include trot work. Freestyle tests may include lateral work.

Grade II team and individual tests are walk-trot. Freestyle tests may include canter and counter-canter work.

Grade III riders compete at the walk, trot, and canter. Freestyle tests may include lateral work and single flying changes.

Grade IV is comparable in difficulty to Third Level dressage. Freestyles may include lateral work and single, three-, and four-time flying changes.



GAME FACE: Accompanied by trainer Kai Handt, owner of his mount Richter Scale, Jonathan Wentz enters the Paralympic equestrian stadium



VETERAN: Rebecca Hart on Lord Ludger looks relaxed and happy in the arena

Individual Tests Prove Highlights for US Riders

Jonathan Wentz was Team USA's top performer at the 2012 Paralympics. He and Richter Scale were fifth in the Grade Ib team test (70.364 percent), fourth in the Grade Ib individual test (70.348), and fifth in their freestyle test (73.000).

"My freestyle was brilliant," Wentz said proudly. The revamped choreography was better organized, with a higher degree of difficulty.

"We made it technically difficult with a lot of ten-meter circles and extensions into a ten-meter circle," Wentz said. "An extension into a ten-meter circle is a movement that is really hard to do, even for able-bodied riders." The Grade Ib rider has cerebral palsy, a motor disability.

"I thought Jonathan and Richter have a great rapport, and that is what shined at the Paralympics," said Missy Ransehausen. "He knows Richter in and out, he can ride each movement, and that is what makes the combination a great combination."

Team captain Rebecca Hart, a veteran of the 2008 Paralympics, earned similar personal-best placings in her Grade II tests: fourth in the team test (69.095) and fifth in the freestyle (73.250).

"It was awesome to be captain and support my teammates," Hart said. "There are definitely ups and downs to every event, and to be there to cheer each one of them on was wonderful."

Hart noted the increase in audience turnout in London: "It was nice to have the stands filled and to have the kind of support that the fans showed for para-equestrian dressage. I don't think we have ever experienced this before as a sport."

Hart, who has an inherited neurological disorder called

familial spastic paraplegia, trains with Missy Ransehausen at the Ransehausen family's Blue Hill Farm in Unionville, PA. Her 2012 Paralympics mount, Lord Ludger, is owned by Missy's mother, dressage rider Jessica Ransehausen, herself a veteran of two Olympic Games, a former US dressage *chef d'équipe*, and a well-known FEI dressage judge.

"We have been working with her new horse over this entire year," Missy Ransehausen said of Lord Ludger. "In the individual test, Lord Ludger was more nervous in the ring and got sucked back behind Rebecca's leg, causing a few point changes in forward momentum. [The pair finished eleventh on 68.286.] Becca has been with me for years, and we have gone through many horses in that time frame. She is a great student and is at times way too hard on herself. In a way, this is what makes her a great competitor because she can leave the ring one day disappointed, learn from her mistakes, and come back and ride a beautiful test."

It was the first Paralympic Games for Grade Ia competitor Donna Ponessa. Ponessa, who has a rare form of multiple sclerosis called Devic's disease, was a top international wheelchair-tennis athlete before she turned to para-equestrian dressage. Grade Ia turned out to be the toughest competition, with its riders not only earning the highest scores of the 2012 Paralympics but also breaking Paralympic records. Great Britain's Sophie Christiansen raked in the headlines and the medals with her scores: 83.765 percent in the Grade Ia team test, 82.750 in the individual test, and 84.750 in the freestyle. All three Grade Ia medal-winning freestyles scored above 78 percent.

Aboard Wesley Dunham's Western Rose, Ponessa placed fifth in her team test (70.235 percent), sixth in the individual (69.200), and eighth in the freestyle (70.750).

"This is such an experience for these athletes, with train-