

Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International

# STRIDES

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## THE CHALLENGES ISSUE

Special Olympics  
World Games

Cancer Kickers™

Insight Into Vision

Camp Challenges



**PATH**  
INTERNATIONAL

# SPECIAL OLYMPICS WORLD GAMES

▼ Equestrian volunteers at the 2015 Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles, CA.

## Managing an International Equestrian Event



*By Bryan McQueeney*

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RIDE ON THERAPEUTIC RIDING AND MATTHEW L. GIBB

**T**his summer marked the first time in 16 years that the Special Olympics World Games, a quadrennial celebration of athletics for individuals with intellectual disabilities, was held in the United States. From July 25 through August 2, 2015, Los Angeles hosted 6,500 athletes competing in 25 sports from all over the world. Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship, a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Chatsworth, CA, was asked to manage the equestrian portion of the Games. Ultimately, equestrian athletes from 11 to 60 years of age arrived from 35 countries, speaking 16 languages, and competed in four disciplines: English equitation, dressage, working trail and team relay. Ride On was uniquely positioned to take on this responsibility. Not only does the center serve more than 250 individuals with disabilities with a team of 22 instructors, therapists and support staff, but for 19 years Ride On has run one of the country's largest competitions for riders with disabilities. The CALNET Show, which takes place at the LA Equestrian Center, the same venue as the World Games, exemplifies how competition is a central part of Ride On's programming.

In August 2014, the Special Olympics World Games LA2015 Organizing Committee presented its vision to a group of equestrians in the Los Angeles area. The LA Equestrian Center in Burbank would host the equestrian competition, but the organizing committee frankly

stated that it didn't have the experience to mount it. The World Games equestrian competition would have more than twice the riders and nearly three times the number of countries that participate in the Paralympics. The organizers were asking for 80 or more horses to eventually compete with 123 athletes. What would it take to pull it off?

Twenty years prior, the author, who became the 2015 competition manager for the Special Olympics World Games, had been part of the management team for the 1996 Paralympics. "My job was to run the coach's meeting each night," said Bryan McQueeney. "Every complaint by the coaches from 13 countries about the horses, the matching or any aspect of the competition ran through me. I came away from that experience with a set of lessons learned, convinced that the complexity of the event exceeded the capacity of the all-volunteer approach and equally convinced that borrowed horse competitions could be done correctly with professional staff leveraging volunteer resources. This became our approach."

It took over four months to iron out all the details with the LA2015 Organizing Committee and actually sign contracts. In the end, the plan Ride On developed projected more than 1,600 paid staff hours supported by 12,000 volunteer hours to mount a safe, world-class competition. The team included 18 PATH Intl.

## SPECIAL OLYMPICS WORLD GAMES CONTRIBUTORS

PATH Intl. would like to congratulate the following PATH Intl. Member Centers and individual PATH Intl. members, whose dedication and remarkable work made the equestrian portion of this year's Games in Los Angeles, CA, a resounding success! Kudos to these team members and all the wonderful volunteers who assisted you!

### Show Management and Horse Operations

- Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship, PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center (PAC), Chatsworth, CA

### Centers Providing Horses

- Hearts Therapeutic Equestrian Center, PATH Intl. PAC, Santa Barbara, CA
- Horses Help, PATH Intl. PAC, Phoenix, AZ
- Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship, PATH Intl. PAC, Chatsworth, CA
- Ride Your Horse Therapeutic Riding Program, Cerritos, CA
- Special Spirit Equestrian, Inc., Shadow Hills, CA
- Therapeutic Riding Center of Huntington Beach, Huntington Beach, CA

### Center Hosting Training Camp

- NDR Therapeutic Riding, Norco, CA

### Competition Staff

- Bryan McQueeney, Competition Manager
- Sara Jones, Deputy Competition Manager, PATH Intl. Advanced Instructor
- Andre Gaston, Competition Operations

### Horse Recruiting and Selection

- Brie (Wilson) Doherty, PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor
- Gloria Hamblin, PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor
- Megan McQueeney, PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor

### Horse Masters

- Amy Sheets, PATH Intl. Certified Master Instructor
- Brie (Wilson) Doherty, PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor
- Megan McQueeney, PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor
- Katie Emmermann, PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor

### Assistant Horse Masters

- Cheryl Garrett, PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor
- Suzie O'Grady, PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor
- Tess Olnick, PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor
- Susan Pruitt, PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor
- Leah Renner, PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor
- Shelly Wright, PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor
- Daphne Doettger, PATH Intl. Instructor-in-Training
- Jen Loupe, PATH Intl. Instructor-in-Training

Certified Instructors from various centers. The horse show management team that oversaw the effort consisted of Equestrian Competition Manager Bryan McQueeney, Deputy Competition Manager Sara Jones and Competitions Operations Manager Andre Gaston. For horse operations Ride On created four teams each led by a horse master, two assistant horse masters and a tack manager. All horses and athletes were assigned to one team so each team worked with 20 to 25 horses from which to mount 30 or 31 athletes.

## ➤ FINDING 80 AMAZING HORSES

Imagine locating approximately 80 horses within six months to fill this job description: Must be sound, safe, able to compete in four disciplines, travel well, settle in quickly, not be spooked by a large (scary) competition arena that can seat up to 3,000 cheering fans, not be too forward, be relatively easy to ride and be tolerant of miscues.

Like the modern Pentathlon, Special Olympics athletes would have less than an hour after being matched with their horses to get to know the equine partners they would be competing on at an international level. Finding the right group of horses for these riders became the single most challenging aspect of the entire show. The first step in that process was identifying the right people to lead it. Fortunately, Ride On has a team of three PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructors—Gloria Hamblin, Megan McQueeney and Brie (Wilson) Doherty—who have an extensive history of evaluating the center's school horses

for competition; each of their highly experienced skill sets was in play as the center began its search. Megan and Brie, along with PATH Intl. Certified Master Instructor Amy Sheets and Registered Instructor Katie Emmermann, later served as the team's horse masters in matching the selected horses with Special Olympics athletes.

Because the center agreed to provide over 20 of its appropriate school horses (the largest single donation), the process started with a great base of wonderful mounts with well-known strengths and weaknesses. To recruit the remaining 60 horses, staff projected it would need to identify and conduct phone interviews with 250 horse owners. Then, staff would need to actually test and ride about 120 horses to qualify 60 for the Games. For six months the team of instructors interviewed horse owners and accepted and rejected horses from all over California and into Arizona.

Understanding if a horse will work in the World Games environment is far more art than science. Then convincing horse owners to trust the center staff with their friend and partner—and to let them down diplomatically if their horse didn't make it—was an on-going effort. Instructors encouraged owners to volunteer for the Games, and about half served as grooms for the entire event. In the end 45 individual horse owners trusted the center with their mounts, which were provided by six PATH Intl. Member Centers. Breeds accepted included Quarter horse, Thoroughbred, Paint, Swedish Warmblood, Trakehner, Connemara, Mustang, Arabian, Haflinger, Percheron



▲ Special Olympian athlete Robert Seignius from the United States riding Mr. P, PATH Intl. Region 10 Equine of the Year.

Draft, Andalusian, Morgan, Welsh pony, PMU Rescue, Hanoverian, Oldenburg and more.

Managing the 2015 CALNET Show, which occurred 10 weeks before the Games, turned out to be the perfect opportunity for road-testing many aspects of the Games and beginning the training of volunteers. The center had an opportunity to bring in about 40 potential borrowed horses to assess them at the actual venue. A team of riders from Uruguay wanted to compete at CALNET, so the center staff had a great opportunity to test its entire horse recruitment and matching process from beginning to end. Volunteers were brought to the LA Equestrian Center so they could see firsthand what the show was like and what their job would entail. The Special Olympics took the opportunity to evaluate its competition software and awards process. Putting these systems under pressure early and investing in training helped ensure the Games went smoothly.

## ► MATCHING 123 ATHLETES

The morning of July 25th when the athletes first arrived on site, they were welcomed by a cavalcade of 40 borrowed horses ridden in pairs performing classic drill maneuvers to music in the Equidome. It was an ambitious test: the horses had only just arrived, the volunteers were only loosely knit and the staff wanted 40 mounted riders parading in a cavernous covered arena to music and excitement on an exact schedule. The crowd cheered and

the horses were brilliant! It was an impressive display designed both to test the horse and barn operations and showcase the wonderful equine athletes that had been recruited. This cavalcade was also important in building a team that could perform at a high level out of the gate. In all, 125 volunteers were needed each day for the horses and show operations. Staff used the cavalcade to begin to forge a group of enthusiastic volunteers into a highly responsive, cohesive team.

Another challenge the team faced was having only the barest, incomplete information about most of the athletes' riding ability. Often there would be no height and weight information. Still, each horse master developed, on paper, a first, second and third choice for each athlete. Knowing the information was imperfect, the staff scheduled a "speed date" between the coaches, athletes and the center's horse teams the day before actual horse matching. Each athlete and coach had about five minutes with the horse master to get accurate information and confirm or change their paper matches.

The experience of the British team illustrates how well the team's horse masters finessed the matching process. Because matching is so important and so sensitive, the team drew lots to see who would be matched first. Great Britain had drawn the short straw; they were to be matched last and consequently were not very happy about their position. The concern, of course, was that the good



▲ LEFT: Special Olympian Bianca Van Belle from Belgium with World Games volunteer Holly Jones. RIGHT: Megan McQueeney, a PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor, riding Dakar during the Horse Master Team Relay.

horses would have been already matched. At the very end of the second day of matching, after 110 of the 120 athletes had been matched, it was time for the team's horse master to pair up Great Britain's athletes. The horse master brought out Ramazotti and Danika, two gorgeous dressage warmbloods. Their athletes were matched and took three gold medals. Great Britain equestrian Georgina Maton and Danika scored 81% in dressage. The seeds of that one small victory were sown months earlier by horse masters who knew their job.

Each of the four horse masters melded their years of knowledge of riding for the disabled and their knowledge of horses and competition to benefit each athlete and horse on their team. Without question the caliber of the horses brought to the venue and the quality of the horse matching process set the stage for the competition's success.

"One thing that stood out to me was the trust between the coaches and me," concludes Horse Master Brie Doherty. "The Guatemalan coach deferred to me when making the final, safe decision for her riders. We worked together as a team to get her riders matched to horses they would be successful on, while maintaining my personal priority of safety."

The horse masters also ensured the horses' well-being and preparation for showing. Every horse was worked every day throughout the 10 days of the equine operations. Each morning a team of 100 grooms would feed, clean,

bathe and braid each horse. A skilled volunteer rider would ride or lunge the horse as directed by the horse master. As rider after rider emerged from the ring with a broad smile and then bent down to pat or hug the horse, the team's staff and volunteers demonstrated unambiguously to the coaches, international officials and the athletes that they had done their job in putting on a world-class event.

Much of the success of the equestrian portion of the Games lay in Ride On's preparation, in building a highly skilled team that worked well together, testing systems early, investing in training and using the core competence of staff as a catalyst to capture the enthusiasm and hard work of volunteers. The center correctly identified costs and equipment needed to mount the show, designed a process for recruiting horses that worked and incorporated an equally strong process for matching athletes to horses. In addition, the center raised over \$50,000 worth of in-kind donations to elevate the competition experience. Borrowed horse competitions are notoriously difficult to stage yet the LA2015 World Games demonstrated that with planning, professionalism and lots of hard work, it can be accomplished at a world-class level.

Bryan McQueeney is the executive director and co-founder of Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship, a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center in Chatsworth, CA. He can be reached at [bryan@rideon.org](mailto:bryan@rideon.org). For more information about the Games, please go to [www.rideon.org/SOWG/](http://www.rideon.org/SOWG/) or see [www.LA2015.org](http://www.LA2015.org).