

Eight Amazing Days

It was "Right On!" for the Special Olympics World Games with Ride On taking the reins.

For Ride On Therapeutic Horsemanship's Sara Jones, the prospect of managing the equestrian competition for the Special Olympics World Games transitioned from being "pieces of paper to real people" well before the first of 123 riders, from 35 countries, entered the Equidome at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center in late July.

First there were reports from her mother in Great Britain about one of her native country's equestrian athletes preparing for the Games. Then there was the day the Olympic torch visited Chatsworth, where Ride On is headquartered. When an Italian half-marathon runner carried the torch through town, "That's when it really all began to seem real for me, even though we'd all been working on it for months and months."

These were the first of many emotional moments for Sara, the Ride On team, the athletes, volunteers and spectators touched by the goings on throughout the Games' eight days of training and competition.

Ride On was chosen to orchestrate the equestrian endeavor for good reason. Every week, the organization puts 200 individuals with disabilities on horseback at its Chatsworth and Newbury Park locations and they've staged horse shows for the disabled at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center for 18 years. Even with those impressive credentials, Sara acknowledges, "We had not taken on anything of this scope."

The biggest challenge was securing suitable horses and matching them to riders. Ride On provided 23 of its own horses, and the rest of the 85 needed were loaned by owners throughout the area. Thankfully, the CalNet show Ride On manages each May was perfectly timed to double as an opportunity to screen horses for suitability. That involved being Steady Eddies in general and not being spooked by the show environment or the covered arena.

Many breeds were represented in the volunteered equines: ponies, Warmbloods, Arabians, Paints, Draft crosses, Appaloosas and Halflingers.

Owners of the horses that made the cut were invited and encouraged to volunteer alongside them as grooms. Whether they were able to do that or not, they had agreed to "turn their horses over to us completely," Sara explains. "That was a big leap of faith and an incredibly lovely thing for them all to do."

mounts for two athletes, requiring special attention for scheduling. And then there were two days of evaluating the right divisions for each athlete competing in the Games' four disciplines: equitation, trail, dressage and a team relay. Within each, the evaluations placed athletes in assisted and independent categories for each level of competition.

"It was just incredible," Sara says of the whole experience. "Being back in the show office, we didn't always see the big picture on a daily basis.

But we had a lot of positive feedback from people at different levels that things went smoothly and were well organized and successful."

Being in command central was both "exhausting and one of the most rewarding things I've ever done," reports Sara, whose main job is Development Director and PATH International Advanced Instructor at Ride On.

The success of equestrian competition at the World Games may well inspire the organization to take on even more than it already has these last 21 years.

A priority may be to rectify one discouraging aspect of this summer's Games: "The U.S. equestrian team did not have one single athlete from California on it." While there are many programs for riders with intellectual challenges in the state, they are not currently run under the Special Olympic brand, she explains. "There's no reason we shouldn't have had a stronger presence."

In addition to volunteers, the Southern California equestrian community was beautifully represented at the Games. 1974 Olympic dressage bronze medalist Hilda Gurney performed a

freestyle exhibition and presented medals during an awards ceremony. Ride On and the Valley View Vaulters sent demonstration squads comprised of able-minded and special needs athletes. The Foxfield Drill Team, Medieval Times Dinner Theater and the Los Angeles County Mounted Sheriffs also performed.

California Riding Magazine salutes all and a special thanks to Kristin Lee for these wonderful photos!



Simultaneously, there was the challenge of selecting 125 horse savvy volunteers to serve as grooms and sidewalkers in classes in which athletes required assistance. As with other sports in the Special Olympics World Games, the number of volunteer applicants exceeded the positions available.

Extensive Preparation

Equestrian competition was preceded by four days of on-site preparation. It took two days to match horses to riders. Horses were sometimes



Miguel Fajardo from Portugal rides Bailey through the Working Trail Course.



Janine Schwirblatt from Germany riding her dressage test on Roo.



Anand Van Pol from Belgium celebrates after a successful Working Trail Course on Calleo.



Andre Sousa from Guatemala gives his coach the thumbs up after riding Algo.



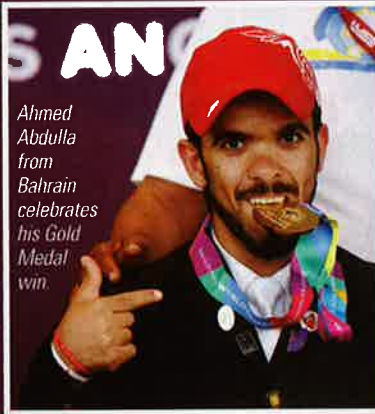
Volunteer Kathi Koenig assisting Amro Abd-Elmaguid from Egypt with his horse Calleo.



Lorena Perdomo from Uruguay kissing her horse Dean.



Ride On's Unified Quadrille Team Gillian Sieker, Nicole Kasyan, Cassie Eriksen and Raquelle Rivera.



Ahmed Abdulla from Bahrain celebrates his Gold Medal win.



Dressage Legend Hilda Gurney inspires all.



Australian Team Coach Chris Nott with athletes Andrew Tanner and Sara Cann share a moment with French Team Coach Thierry Descouture and athletes Laurio Descouture and Alexandre Gau.



Team Finland and Team Bahrain showing off their hardware!