



# RIDE ON!

HORSEBACK THERAPY IS BENEFICIAL FOR CHILDREN & ADULTS LIVING WITH PHYSICAL, COGNITIVE, AND EMOTIONAL DISABILITIES.. HOW DID IT START, AND WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR ONE RESPECTED PROGRAM TO MANAGE EQUESTRIAN EVENTS FOR THE UPCOMING 2015 SUMMER SPECIAL OLYMPICS?

BY MIDORI MORGAN

“ Ride On will be overseeing 140 Special Olympic athletes with intellectual disabilities from 27 countries, speaking 16 different languages. Four disciplines of equestrian competition are being offered: equitation, trail, dressage, and a team relay. ”

There are “first times” for everything. For cowgirls, one of these “firsts” may have been actually getting up on a horse, deciding to take lessons to improve our riding skills, or entering a competitive riding event. For Jennifer Maddox, who has been a participant in the Special Olympics since kindergarten (she is now 31), one remarkable “first” will be competing in the equestrian events at the Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles this year!

The Special Olympics was founded in 1968, and the movement has grown to include more than 4.4 million athletes in 177 countries. The mission of the Special Olympics is “to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympic athletes and the community.”

The World Games are the flagship events for the Special Olympics. They take place every two years, alternating between Summer and Winter Games. The Summer Games will be staged in Los Angeles from July 25th to August 2nd, 2015. It will be the largest sports and humanitarian event anywhere in the world this year, and the single biggest event in Los Angeles since the 1984 Olympic Games.

Interestingly enough, an amazing “first” occurred at the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki, an event so significant that it is generally regarded as the impetus for the development of therapeutic riding.

Up until 1952, one had to be a commissioned military officer to compete in dressage at the Olympic Games. However, at these games, it was a woman—a very special woman—who took the silver medal in Grand Prix dressage. She was the first woman, ever, to medal in an

individual sport competing directly against men, and that is not even her most impressive accomplishment! Lis Hartel contracted polio at the age of 23, right in the middle of a successful dressage career (she was the Danish champion in 1943 and 1944).

As a result, Lis was permanently paralyzed from the knees down, her arms and hands affected as well. Despite medical advice to the contrary, she was determined to continue her dressage career, even though she had to be helped onto her horse to ride. Her win at the Olympics astonished medical and equine professionals throughout Europe.

The British Royal Family was so impressed by the triumphs of this Danish woman (Lis won another silver medal at the 1956 Olympics), that they granted support for the founding of the British Riding for the Disabled Association in 1969.

Word of this new therapy tool spread to North America and Canada, and centers for therapeutic riding began springing up, along with the creation of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA). Founded in 1969, the organization changed its name to PATH Intl. (The Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship International) in 2011, and provides training and education, safety guidelines, instructor certification and center accreditation for horse-assisted therapy programs.

Ride On, founded in 1994, is a Therapeutic Horsemanship and PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center, and has been selected to manage the eight days of training and competition for the equestrian portion of the Special Olympics World Games that will take place at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center this summer. Ride On will be overseeing 140 athletes from 27 countries, speaking 16 different languages. Four disciplines of equestrian competition are being offered: equitation, trail, dressage and a team relay.



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**T**he World Games Organizing Committee selected Ride On in part because they have been running horse shows at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center for the disabled for the past 18 years.

Additionally, since its inception, Ride On has provided a staggering 81,000 safe, effective, and individualized lessons and therapy treatments. Currently, the program puts 200 individuals with disabilities on horseback each week. Co-founder Gloria Hamblin is a three-time coach of U.S. Dressage teams competing at the Paralympic and World Championship levels, and Ride On Executive Director Bryan McQueeney was the top manager at the 1996 Paralympic Dressage Championship Competition in Atlanta. The Atlanta Paralympics mounted 54 disabled athletes from a dozen countries on borrowed horses over a two-week period.

Providing borrowed horses for these events is a tremendously challenging feat, and Ride On must find and present 80 sound, safe, experienced horses that are appropriately matched to the athletes. For the summer Special Olympics, Ride On is bringing in twenty horses

from their own Therapeutic Horsemanship Center, but are relying on horse owners from the Southern California equestrian community to step up and loan their personal horses to make up the remaining spots in the remuda. Of course, Ride On must deem offered horses substantially suitable for this unique task, and equally as important, assure owners entrusting their horses to the cause, that the animals will be treated and cared for as assiduously as one of Ride On's own. In fact, Ride On invites owners to literally come along for the ride, and volunteer to groom at the events.

Kate Wilber, faculty member at University of Southern California, lives just up the street from Ride On's facility in Chatsworth. Her daughter (who is now 30) was a horse-crazed kid, and spent quite a bit of time in her younger years volunteering at Ride On. When Kate found out about Ride On's need for borrowed horses, she knew she had a perfect candidate, and step up she did! "Molly" is her 17-year-old, 15.3 hand paint mare. "She is just exquisitely beautiful, loves to be admired, and has the disposition of a Labrador retriever," Kate explains.

**ABOVE & RIGHT:** Participants in Ride On's therapeutic riding programs may receive adoptive riding services and lessons, or "hippotherapy," a more strategic, scientific use of the horse to deliver physiological benefits, especially useful for physical disabilities such as cerebral palsy.







"She is extremely people oriented, and is especially great with children." Executive Director, Bryan McQueeney accepted Molly for the equestrian events due to her docile, willing, fearless, and kind attitude. Molly is also extremely versatile, having done miles of trail work, some dressage, and is virtually bombproof. When Kate was asked what she would take away from this arrangement, she said, "I think so highly of Ride On and their mission, it is one of my donations to them. I also believe Molly will really love doing it. She loves kids, and if I didn't ride as much, being a therapy horse would be a perfect full-time job for her!" Both Kate and her daughter plan to attend the World Games, supporting Molly, and the athletes assigned to ride the mare.

"Assigning athletes to horses is an extremely challenging, and heartfelt process," says Bryan McQueeney. Before the 140 equestrian athletes arrive in Los Angeles, Ride On will have profiled both horses and riders, making the first round of tentative assignments on paper.

relatively new discipline for her), trail, and equitation. She will have had a year to prepare for the World Games events, on horses that she is accustomed to at the Calvin Center. She will have only two days, however, to practice on the actual horse that she will compete on in Los Angeles.

What happens at Ride On when the Special Olympics World Games are not in town? Operating out of their locations in California (Newbury Park and Chatsworth) they specialize in providing horse-assisted therapy for people with physical and cognitive disabilities in two formats: Adaptive Riding and Hippotherapy.

Adaptive (or therapeutic) riding is a unique combination of sport, recreation and education. Lessons typically involve safety practices on and around horses, warm up exercises, games, and riding skills including equitation and obstacles. Benefits include increased strength, better control over posture and balance, improved memory and cognitive skills, and an increase in ability to focus on tasks. Perhaps

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Then, when everyone is physically gathered together, two full days are spent putting the partners together in real life, and making any necessary "team adjustments" before the Games commence. "Very careful assessments must be made, matching the riders needs with the horse's abilities, all while keeping a level playing field," Bryan explains.

Jennifer Maddox is one of the athletes eagerly waiting to fly to Los Angeles this July, to be matched with the equine partner she will compete on in the games. "I am so excited! I wasn't sure I was going to get picked for the World Games!" Jennifer exclaims. Jennifer is the only Special Olympics athlete from Georgia that was chosen for the equestrian events at the World Games. She's not new to being a Special Olympics athlete (she began participating in 1991), but Jennifer did not seriously take up riding until she got involved with the Calvin Center, based out of Atlanta, in 2006. Her involvement with therapeutic riding at Calvin, she says, "Has helped me a lot, as far as balance and posture, and I've come so far as an equestrian."

From her start at the Calvin Center, where she was first shown how to approach a horse safely, groom, and tack up, she has advanced to being a regular competitor at local Special Olympics events held in her home state of Georgia. She participates in trail, equitation, showmanship and unified drill team events. At the Special Olympic World Games, Jennifer will be competing in dressage (which is a

the most rewarding benefits, however, are marked boosts in self-esteem and confidence. This is the type of therapy that Jennifer Maddox is a recipient of at the Calvin Center in Atlanta.

Hippotherapy (*Hippos* from the Greek word for horse) is a term that refers to using the movement of a horse as a treatment strategy. Bryan McQueeney explains that Hippotherapy is a bona fide medical treatment for patients, always including a Licensed Physical, Occupational, or Speech therapist that properly positions the patient on the horse, analyzes the patient's response, and directs the horse's movement to achieve specific treatment goals. Although the patient is on the horse, this treatment has nothing to do with learning how to ride, but it has everything to do with how the movement of the horse increases quality of life, and physical functioning.

How does this miraculous use of the horse actually work? The well-trained therapy horse moves in a rhythmic, symmetrical, and organized way. Each step the horse takes provides strong physical input in many dimensions including up and down and side to side. Sensory input from the horse's movement to the patient's vestibular system (which regulates balance), the patient's proprioceptive system (which registers position in space), and also the patient's visual system, occurs concurrently. The horse, in some respects, 'lends' his nervous system to the patient, so that the rider may experience organized movement. This organized movement with natural variability cannot be achieved by a machine or in a clinic setting.

**RIGHT:** Jennifer Maddox will compete this summer in the equestrian events of the 2015 Special Olympic World Games in Los Angeles. Ride On will provide a horse for her to ride in the events.









An equestrian at the Ride On therapeutic riding center bonds with her mount.



A study, carried out at the Washington University of Medicine, Program in Occupational Therapy St. Louis, entitled "Changes in Dynamic Trunk/Head Stability and Functional Reach after Hippotherapy," describes scientific research that shows how therapy utilizing the motion of a horse has significant impact on the head and trunk stability for children with movement disorders, and clearly demonstrates that young children with cerebral palsy can also have impressive improvements in arm and hand control. These therapeutic benefits (that are now being proven and reported in the scientific literature) are ample evidence to support the positive uses of horses to help rehabilitate humans. The research findings for this study were published in Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. The American Physical Therapy Association, the American Occupational Association, and the American Speech and Hearing Association consider Hippotherapy standard practice.

The horse has long been a symbol for healing, physical strength, and vitality. Horses can also symbolize the ability to overcome obstacles, and pursue our goals no matter what stands in the way. Perhaps horses are more than just a symbol, however. Our modern day therapeutic use of horses is returning tangible results to people across the world. Lives are changed every day at Ride On, and at other centers for therapeutic riding. Disabled or not, we have all heard our fellow cowgirls say, "Being with my horse is my therapy!"

Do you have any "firsts" or goals in mind for yourself? Need a little cowgirl courage? We all have our own set of unique obstacles to face, but surely, women like Lis Hartel and Jennifer Maddox, programs like the Special Olympics, and centers like Ride On are a profound source of inspiration.

The take away? Be thankful for what you have, pursue your goals, and set your mind to accomplishing those "firsts" you've been thinking about. Ride on, ladies, Ride on! And...may the horse be with you!

Learn more about Ride On at [rideon.org](http://rideon.org).  
For more about the 2016 Special Olympics  
World Games visit [la2015.org](http://la2015.org)

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