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Group looks to area's equestrian tradition

Ride On seeks horses for athletes to ride in the Special Olympics games.

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A rider competes in an equestrian event at the 2011 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Athens. With the 2015 Summer Games in Los Angeles just months away, local equestrian groups are searching for up to 120 loaner horses to be ridden by Olympians ages 7 to 64. (Courtesy of the Special Olympics / July 3, 2011)

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By Sara Cardine, sara.cardine@latimes.com
March 12, 2015 | 10:51 a.m.

In July, athletes representing 177 nations will descend upon the city of Los Angeles for the 2015 Special Olympics Summer Games, bringing with them coteries of fans, trainers and all the equipment necessary for competition.

But, due to logistics and competition rules, the 140 or so Olympians competing in the Games' equestrian events will not be allowed to bring their own horses. Instead, they will have to rely on steeds temporarily on loan from stables, trainers and riding clubs throughout Greater Los Angeles.

"The call for horses capable of working with Special Olympics athletes is very important," said Mary Benson of the city of Los Angeles' Equine Advisory Committee, which is aiding in the search process. "It is a very special skill set these horses have to have."

The task of finding horses that fit the bill is being undertaken by Ride On, a therapeutic horsemanship nonprofit that operates facilities in Chatsworth and Newbury Park. For the past two months, specialists have been in talks with equestrians as far away as Northern California and Arizona, according to development director and advanced instructor Sara Jones.

Locating as many as 120 horses with the physical build, temperament and availability required to accommodate riders ranging in age from 7 to 64 is a tall order, Jones admits. That's why all candidates must be interviewed, inspected and ridden before being approved.

"We're kind of looking all across the board," Jones said. "With so many riders to match, it's going to be a challenge. The horses need to be pretty patient, and they need to be pretty willing."

So far, the group has committed 22 loaner horses from its own population and has a list of nearly 60 more identified by area equestrians. Some of the volunteers already board their horses at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center in Burbank, where the Olympic equestrian competitions will take place.

Among them is Burbank resident and dressage trainer Lehua Custer, who's agreed to volunteer as a judge in the dressage category and is lending her 19-year-old Swedish Warmblood, Ramazotti 75, to the cause.

"I just wanted to give whatever help I could, since it's in my own backyard," Custer said of her motivation for participating. "(And) Ramazotti is a fantastic teacher and a really nice guy."

None of the horses identified as candidates by Ride On have yet to hail from La Cañada Flintridge. But local horse lovers see the area as a rich source for potential equine Olympians.

"Horses and riders are a familiar sight throughout La Canada Flintridge," said Randy Strapazon, horse enthusiast and past president of the Trails Council, in an email interview. "The town's extensive trail system is an integral part of the long tradition of backyard horse keeping."

Strapazon said the city's horse population has been estimated in years past at around 220 horses.

"In 2015, the number is smaller. However, the equestrian lifestyle still flourishes in backyard barns and at the Flintridge Riding Club," Strapazon said.

Custer said she felt confident Ride On would be able to find enough loaner horses from throughout the area.

"I feel like the horses are out there," she said. "It's got to be a little bit of a leap of faith, and it's a big undertaking. But this is such big horse country."