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Diane Kastama driving Kasper, a 22-year-old New Forest Pony owned by Koos de Ronde, at the 2018 FEI Para Equestrian World Championships in Kronenberg, the Netherlands. Photo courtesy of Netherlands Photo by Marie de Ronde

PATHWAY TO PARA-EQUESTRIAN SPORTS

Para-equestrian sports are some of the fastest growing sports in the equestrian industry. They are comprised of nationally and internationally governed equestrian disciplines, most notably para-dressage and para-driving. While there are other para-equestrian disciplines in the

developing stages, such as para-reining, para-dressage and para-driving are the only disciplines recognized by the international governing body, the Federation Equestrian International (FEI), making them eligible for major championships, such as the World Equestrian Games and Paralympics. Both

PARA-DRESSAGE COACH CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

WHAT IS IT? The United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) created an inaugural coach certificate program in para-dressage in 2018. It was the first of its kind for the federation and was created under the vision and curricular guidance of Michel Assouline, USEF Technical Advisor and Head of Coach Development for the Para-Dressage Team. The program develops the coach's ability to prepare athletes from grassroots education to international competitions. It covers the principles of para-equestrian dressage coaching, including guided improvement processes, personal conduct and technical skill acquisition toward an effective development of coaching activities. This USEF initiative was conducted in partnership with PATH Intl., with the help of Carlisle Academy and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs through a Federal Adaptive Sport Grant. The overarching goal is to increase awareness and coach education opportunities within para-equestrian sports and aid in the development of a USEF Coach database to support the competition pipeline for eligible athletes, including para-eligible veterans.

RESULTS OF PILOT: Over 25 coaches went through the pilot program and earned their formal USEF Para-Dressage Coach Certificate at the apprentice, bronze, silver or master level. Over 50% of these coaches are PATH Intl. Certified Instructors who applied for the first wave and received financial aid. The resounding feedback was that PATH Intl. coaches appreciated having the opportunity to strengthen their knowledge and receive sport-specific training and coaching philosophy support in a growing field that will benefit athletes wanting to pursue this type of competition. Jaymie Bartels, a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor, a Special Olympics Tier 2 Head Coach and a newly-minted USEF Para-Dressage Coach, states about her experience, "I am a 100% disabled veteran and started on this journey 13 years ago in June 2006 as

sports were founded in Great Britain by passionate equestrians inspired to offer competitive opportunities to equestrian athletes with disabilities. Para-dressage was created in the 1960s and became the only recognized equestrian discipline in the Paralympic Games in 1996, and para-driving has been an international sport since 1989.

Within the United States, these disciplines are governed by the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF), which governs the country's equestrian sports. According to USEF, "The primary purpose of para-equestrian sport is to provide educational and competitive opportunities for athletes with physical impairments. Para-equestrian sports, in particular, opens a world of competition to riders whose impairments might preclude them from other forms of sport, and does so while providing a structured, focused, and highly competitive environment."

"Para" in this case refers to those sports being "parallel" to able-bodied equestrian sports. Unlike the Special Olympics' equestrian division, which is inclusive of athletes with intellectual disabilities or cognitive delays and allows for rider assistance, para-equestrian sports are designed for the independent rider and driver with permanent, measurable physical disabilities seeking a competitive track. Riders must be free of handlers and sidewalkers, and drivers must drive independently but may have an able-bodied whip as back-up assistance in the carriage. Para-dressage is conducted in a similar fashion to conventional dressage, utilizing dressage figures and movements in complex patterns and can include a freestyle test. Para-driving operates under the same basic rules as

combined driving, which consists of the same three phases as their able-bodied counterparts with dressage, cones and marathon phases all contested during a two- or three-day competition.

CLASSIFICATIONS AND COMPENSATIONS

Men and women compete against one another as in all equestrian sports; however, in para-equestrian sports, competitors are placed in "grades" based on their functional abilities. Athletes need to meet minimum impairment requirements in order to compete in recognized national and international divisions, and this process is known as sport classification. Each Paralympic or adaptive sport has its own sport-specific classification protocol that is conducted by a credentialed classifier. Classifiers are typically physical therapists or physicians trained to measure functional ability, strength, range of motion, trunk/pelvic control and use of limbs related to the sport. Athletes are provisionally classified at the national level for approximately six months and then may pursue international classification, which allows them to enter the top level of competition. During the classification process, athletes are given allowances for adaptive equipment and other supports, otherwise known as compensating aids. This information is issued on a dispensation certificate and recorded on a master list.

Compensating aids, by definition, are used to compensate for the physical or sensory limitation resulting from an athlete's impairments, thereby enabling the

a volunteer at a therapeutic riding center in south Florida. I continue to educate myself whenever possible. The recent para-dressage coach program was an enriching education and amazing opportunity. I am now on a new journey of increasing my technical knowledge and developing myself as a coach to promote para-equestrian opportunities to eligible individuals, especially veterans, in therapeutic riding programs. I want to be the best coach I can be to assist athletes wanting to start the competitive phase of their riding.”

For riders with visual impairments, callers, who act as living letters, are stationed around the exterior of the arena and call out letters at the appropriate time, as well as identify the center line and quarter lines. Photo courtesy of Jere Gray



individual to participate in the sport. These modifications must not give the athlete any advantage beyond compensating for loss of function and may be used for safety reasons. Examples of compensating aids in para-dressage include, but are not limited to, loop reins for a rider with poor grasp, securing stirrup leathers to the girth, use of two whips, riding with one hand only, salute with head only, special handholds on the saddle, postural supports and orthoses to control body parts, and “living letters” around the arena for riders who are visually impaired. (Callers, who act as living letters, are stationed around the exterior of the arena and call out letters at the appropriate time, as well as identify the center line and quarter lines.) Examples in para-driving include looped reins, rein stops, supportive seats, quick-release seat belts, second set of reins and hand brakes on a carriage. All standard compensating aids are approved by USEF and FEI in competition and are field tested for safety. Modifications not included on a standard list must be brought to the governing body for approval.

Within sport classification, there are five grades for para-dressage and two grades for para-driving. In para-dressage, grade 1 represents athletes with the greatest degree of impairment while grade 5 denotes the least amount of impairment. Similarly, in para-driving, grade 1 are the athletes with the greatest amount of impairment while grade 2 indicates the lesser impaired. In para-dressage, the degree of difficulty intensifies and the gaits increase as an athlete moves through the grades, while in para-driving, grades 1 and 2 drive the same course and dressage pattern.

As Diane Kastama, president of the United States

Driving for the Disabled, Inc., attests, it may not always be obvious which exhibitors are disabled and using accommodations and which are not. “Para driving is an equalizing sport,” said Kastama, who is an FEI Silver Medal of Honor recipient with six medals in para-driving. “Once an athlete with a disability is in a carriage driving a horse, the person is looked at the same as any other athlete. In fact, when I first started competing, I surprised many people back in the barn when I got out of my carriage and back in my wheelchair. The judges had no idea I was paralyzed.”

TESTS AND COMPETITIONS

FEI has created dressage and driven dressage tests designated for each grade. For para-dressage there are five test options with compulsory movements ranging in complexity from the introductory, novice, team, individual and freestyle tests. Riders compete in their own para-dressage divisions at a show divided by grade. Once an athlete has a preliminary knowledge of the grade they fall within, the introductory para-dressage test is the best place for a new athlete to start learning the geometry of the arena and the basic dressage figures and movements. It also serves as an excellent bridge from therapeutic-based riding into sport-oriented riding within PATH Intl. Member Centers. Riders may enter a local dressage schooling show, making a request of show management for a “para-test of choice” class, where all para-athletes are grouped together and any test can be ridden. From

HELPFUL PARA-EQUESTRIAN LINKS

Para-dressage and para-driving disciplines are governed by the U.S. Equestrian Federation (USEF), which oversees the rules, officials and standards of all recognized equestrian sports. The federation (www.usef.org) also runs the USEF High Performance Programs, selects and fields U.S. teams and is the national federation recognized by the international federation, the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI). The United States Para-Equestrian Association (www.uspea.org) is a recognized National Affiliate of USEF, “and assists athletes with eligible physical impairments in expanding their knowledge and experience in the disciplines of Para-Equestrian sports.”

Both organizations are aided by the growth of the USEF/USPEA Para-Equestrian Centers of Excellence (COE) regionally located across the U.S. The COEs help in the talent search for new athletes, may act as a bridge for Paralympic Sport Clubs and U.S. Pony Clubs activity, serve as training hubs for coach development and veteran outreach and conduct onsite horse shows for emerging athlete competition opportunities.

For more in-depth study of each sport in terms of eligible impairments, sport classifications, competition rules and pathways for pipeline development, please view the three hours of free PATH Intl. approved continuing education located at the USEF Learning Center <https://www.usef.org/network/coverage/USParaWebinars/>.

Paralympian and PATH Intl. Certified Instructor Krystal is able to incorporate her own first-hand experience with some of the challenges her students experience by providing input on how they could apply it to their riding. Photo courtesy of Jere Gray



there, riders build their skills and scores to compete at the recognized national or international level demonstrating a higher degree of difficulty and the ability to manage in a pressurized environment. These recognized events have formal para-dressage divisions by grade.

In para-driving, there are four levels of competition at national events: training, preliminary, intermediate and advanced. Para-drivers compete in open classes against able-bodied drivers. Beginners would start at training level, and as their skill progresses, they would move up. Competitions known as arena driving trials and horse driving trials, held as one or two-day events by local driving clubs, are a good place to learn the sport. Only at international competitions are FEI para-driving divisions separated from able-bodied competition.

Judging both para-dressage and para-driving competitions requires the same level of scrutiny and objective assessment as able-bodied competition. As athletes, para-equestrians work hard and train weekly to gain new skills and earn their marks. The judge's comments reflect the collective marks sought after in a dressage or driven dressage test. These include such things as freedom and regularity of the paces, desire to

move forward, confidence, harmony, lightness and ease of movements, acceptance of the bridle, use of aids, equestrian feel and skill of the athlete in terms of accuracy of figures and transitions.

A coach's sport-specific knowledge in para-dressage or para-driving is very important as an athlete embarks on this sport journey. In all cases, coaches need to nurture athlete development and create an optimal talent environment, including resiliency, self-belief and accountability. Coaches who can stay adaptive and creative, thinking outside the proverbial box, will find more ready solutions and develop winning habits. One of the hallmarks of the newly developed USEF Para-Dressage Coach Certificate Program (see page 34) has been the collaborative approach to learning from other coaches within the unique para-dressage experience.

STARTING A SPORTS DIVISION

Creating a sports division at PATH Intl. Member Centers doesn't have to be limited to para-eligible participants only. Carlisle Academy Integrative Equine Therapy & Sports, which the author founded with her

husband Nick, operates as an accredited U.S. Pony Club Riding Center, USOC Paralympic Sport Club, a USEF/USPEA Para-Equestrian Center of Excellence (COE), and a PATH Intl. Premier Accredited Center with a 20-year history. The academy's services include therapy, sport and enrichment programs. Each area draws from a particular curriculum, but the cross-training of staffing and horses and cross-pollination of ideas and options for participants is particularly liberating. Some participants graduate from one area into another as deemed appropriate, while others lend a hand to help participants in greater need. It makes for a rich learning environment.

One para-equestrian Krystal Greco, whose first-hand perspective enriches her teaching as a PATH Intl. Certified Registered Instructor, talks about her journey. "As an able-bodied rider who was paralyzed from the waist down in 2010, the availability of para-equestrian sports was very encouraging as I adjusted to life with my disability," she said. "It has given me a number of short- and long-term goals to work toward, while keeping me active in the community I am passionate about and nurturing my competitive spirit. Immediately following my paralysis, I gained a tremendous amount of weight, and with having para-dressage competition as a goal, I lost over 70 pounds and was able to get into the best shape of my life. I am now successfully competing in both small therapeutic and able-bodied dressage schooling shows with my own horse and have hopes to advance to the national level in the future."

A new development that helped Carlisle Academy find a space for riders and drivers who were not para-eligible, but wanted to move beyond adaptive/therapeutic riding, is a program the academy coined Adaptive Equestrian Sports™. This program has a clear sport orientation and enables participants to be on a team. It utilizes U.S. Pony Club horse management curriculum and existing sports (e.g., quadrille, dressage, mounted games, polocrosse) in a modified way to make it accessible to an audience that might need extra support, extra time or adaptive equipment. It is open to people with intellectual, emotional and physical challenges. Each team has a team captain, and all teams come together for an in-house competition at the end of the session. Participants earn ribbons and badges for the new skills they gain on and off the horse. Riders and drivers who emerge from this introductory competition program may go into para-equestrian sports, while some continue on into recreational riding or driving. Many of the riders who came into Adaptive Equestrian Sports™ started at the academy in hippotherapy. This continuum of service is part and parcel of Carlisle's integrated mission.

There is a great deal PATH Intl. Centers can do to include sports and competition for participants. Centers may want to keep competition onsite, or they may choose

to partner with another center nearby for an inter-barn show, or possibly venture offsite to a local event, whether in dressage, driving, Western/English classes, or a fun show. PATH Intl. Centers that choose to also become a Para-Equestrian COE may host regional COE shows or ready their para-athlete for a recognized competition given some of the suggested steps already mentioned. COEs also become regional hubs of education and inspiration, hosting training camps and promoting para-equestrian coach development. At some of the COEs, a para-dressage athlete with a visual impairment, Suzanne Ament, has become a traveling demonstration rider. Because she needs living letters, which equates to nine people calling out the letter at each of the dressage markers, she generates great interest in her ability to navigate the arena without sight. She performs a walk-trot test with ease and shows an intrigued audience the extent to which people adapt to and move beyond their limitations. Suzanne writes, "Being a demo rider is less stressful than a show or a clinic, and it does allow for new points of view and a tremendous education. Given my particular disability, I have found a niche in educating people about what people with visual impairments can achieve."

The benefit of opening up the competitive side of dressage and driving to existing center participants cannot be underestimated. PATH Intl. Centers are accustomed to and quite adept at identifying goals related to building self-confidence and promoting a healthy lifestyle. Moving toward a competitive outlet and sport orientation can also promote inclusion in a team experience and enhance resiliency, discipline and rehabilitation through sports, which are all cornerstone values of the adaptive sport and adaptive physical education fields. Furthermore, PATH Intl. Centers can serve as pipeline development for emerging athletes in equestrian sports, be they para-equestrian or other able-bodied disciplines. Bridging the divide between therapeutic horsemanship and sport and challenging participants through meaningful skill development helps them reach beyond therapeutic benefit and diversifies a center's strength-based education. It's a win-win for participants, centers and shows.

Sarah Armentrout, a USEF Para-Dressage Silver Coach and PATH Intl. Certified Advanced Instructor, trained at The National Center for Equine Facilitated Therapy in California, and was a working student for Peggy Cummings' Connected Riding in Idaho. She and her husband, Nick, managed the Sagebrush Equine Training Center for the Handicapped before establishing Equest Therapeutic Riding Center on their Spring Creek Farm in Lyman, ME, in 1998. In 2011, they launched Carlisle Academy Integrative Equine Therapy & Sports, LLC, building upon the success of Equest, while expanding into new areas of training and leadership and integrating traditional and para-equestrian education. She can be reached at sarmentrout@carlisleacademymaine.com