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Local middle schooler on quest to become a Paralympic horse rider

By Kathleen Lundberg

Sydney Collier is a 13-year-old **equestrian** who attends Forsythe Middle School (http://forsythe.a2schools.org/forsythe.home/forsythe_home) and is hoping to represent the United States some day at the Paralympic (<http://usparalympics.org/?cmpid=2&keyword=Paralympics+2012>) games. As an important step toward this goal, Sydney travels this week to Del Mar, Calif. to meet with current Paralympian hopefuls, as they compete for berth on the 2012 team.

Sydney has been riding **horses** since age 7. At about the time she was first learning to ride, she began having vision problems. An eye examination revealed right/left vision differences, ultimately leading to a diagnosis of Wyburn-Mason Syndrome (<http://www.cigna.com/healthinfo/nord588.html>)(WMS), which is characterized by irregular, fragile blood vessels within the head.

At age 8, Sydney began undergoing a series of medical treatments and interventions. Over the years, she has undergone multiple surgeries and radiation treatments. Her course was complicated in the summer of 2009 by loss of vision in her right eye and a stroke which resulted in partial paralysis of her left side. Sydney's love of horses and desire to ride and even compete helped motivate her to put her best effort into recovery.



Sydney works on physical therapy

Photo courtesy of Anna Collier



Sydney and her horse, Chip

Photo courtesy of Anna Collier

Each week Sydney goes to school, chats with friends, does her homework and goes to physical therapy to help strengthen and coordinate her left side. In addition, she takes regular riding lessons with Pam Bauer of German Magic Farm (<http://www.germanmagicfarm.com/>) on her horse, Chip.

Chip is a tobiano (<http://www.apha.com/breed/tobiano.html>) American Paint Horse. (<http://www.apha.com/breed/>) He is beautiful and agile, but his qualities of calmness, patience, and kindness under saddle make him an especially valuable partner for Sydney. Working with her horse lets Sydney leave her own troubles for a while, as she focuses mind and body on communicating with her horse.



The horse does not know or care anything about intracerebral circulation. He wants to know what is being asked of him and how he is supposed to respond.

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It is common knowledge that if you are frightened while riding, that emotion will translate through your body language to your horse, who may become worried, as well. Likewise, if you are distracted or frustrated by your own situation, be it health issues or stress at school or work, your horse will not respond well. He may just drift off himself and start acting on his own ideas, where ever that may take the both of you.

Riding encourages you to be truly present and to live in the moment. Decide what you want to do, how to do it, and clearly convey this to your partner, who happens to be a large and powerful beast. Riding can be very empowering, as Sydney will attest.

The next Paralympic Equestrian Games (<http://usparalympics.org/sports/summer-paralympic-sports/equestrian>) will be held in London, Aug. 30 - Sept. 4, 2012. The competition consists of two Dressage (<http://www.usdf.org/about/about-dressage/>) tests. The first test will be a test of a certain set of movements, and the second will be a Freestyle component, for which riders set their own movements to music. Paralympic Equestrian games debuted in Atlanta in 1996 and have been gaining popularity in numbers of participating countries and individuals since.

There are many horse activities which persons of varying age and ability levels can participate in. High impact, fast speed activities such as calf roping and cross county jumping may be best left for those with intact balance and strength. However, many **Western** (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_riding) (Halter, Showmanship, Pleasure) and English (Dressage, Hunter on the Flat, Saddleseat) disciplines, as well as Driving, may lend themselves to persons with limitations.

Therapeutic riding is dedicated to enabling persons with mild to very significant physical and mental challenges to ride and is a discipline unto itself. If you want to work with horses, there are many options!

Good luck in California, Sydney! We hope you come home energized to work with Chip, and that someday we have opportunity to travel to see you compete as a Paralympian. If you would like to learn more about Sydney or help her on her way, check out her website: Syd's Paraquest.

(<http://www.sydsparaquest.com/about.htm>)

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