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Sydney Collier - A Young Para-Equestrian's Journey is a Life Lesson

Submitted on 03/29/2011 to [Para Dressage](#) [1]

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Debbie McDonald with Sydney, Dave and Anna Collier who attended the USPEA clinic following the Dressage Affaire in California

Albion College's Nancy G. Held Equestrian Center raised \$1500 at jumper benefit show to help 13 year-old Sydney Collier and her parents, Anna and Dave, travel from Ann Arbor, MI to The Dressage Affaire in Del Mar, CA and ride in the two-day clinic with

Olympian Debbie McDonald. Sporthorse Saddlery in New Hudson, MI also helps sponsor Sydney by supplying her with horse and rider equipment.

With pink streaks in her hair and cheerful poise, Sydney Collier lights up talking about horses. As the new USEF Junior Young Rider rep for Para-Equestrians, she wants to spread the word about the emerging junior para-dressage divisions so more younger riders can learn about opportunities, clinics and competitions. Despite dealing with a series of major medical issues, Sydney's love of horses and passion to excel in the saddle keeps her smiling and highly motivated.



Sydney Collier and Spirit

Riding since age seven, Collier's focus was on eventing her Haflinger/Paint pony Spirit, aka Mr. Cellophane. "He's totally clear you can't even see him," she jokes.

But it was her own blurry vision at age eight that signaled a problem. She was diagnosed with an extremely rare life-threatening medical condition called Wyburn-Mason Syndrome, which causes vascular malformations (AVMs) deep within the brain and in Sydney's case, along the right optic nerve.

Sydney underwent experimental treatment at Stanford University Hospital in Palo Alto, CA that entailed multiple CyberKnife radiation doses to her brain and eye to clear the AVMs. She has

also had three brain surgeries.

Sydney completely lost the vision in her right eye and suffered a stroke that severely impairs the left side of her body. She had to relearn to walk and continues physical and occupational therapy to strengthen her left side and combat the effects of radiation.

Riding was a huge motivating factor and Sydney got back in the saddle quicker than anyone predicted. She regularly competes against able-bodied riders but when she heard about the High Performance Para Equestrian program run jointly through the USPEA and USEF, she wanted to learn more.

Para-Awareness



Jonathan Wentz

"Our trip to the 2011 Alltech/FEI World Equestrian Games opened our world," according to Anna Collier. Watching the quality of the top para-dressage riders in the world really impressed Sydney. "Riders more handicapped than me ride better than me!" And she was interested that it was "so different from eventing dressage."

Sydney was thrilled to meet Jonathan Wentz, the youngest member of the U.S squad at 19 years-old, who has become a role model for many younger riders. A Grade 1b rider with cerebral palsy, Wentz is a dedicated competitor and working student for trainer Kai Handt at North Texas Equestrian Center (NTEC) in Wylie, TX. He attends Southern Methodist University and will

spend this summer training in Denmark.



[2]A lot of younger riders find each other using social media like Face Book and USPEA keeps up an active Face Book fan page. Para-awareness is slowly building but many parents and riders still don't know about disabled riding or driving beyond the therapy level. "There are a lot of potential para riders and horses we haven't tapped yet," says Hope Hand, Director of the USPEA.

The Colliers were encouraged by George Halkett, the Director of Albion's Equestrian Program. A Scottish native, he had seen the world class British para-dressage system and believes that para-equestrian deserves greater recognition in the U.S. "It's about finding connections, networking for trainers, horses and sponsors. It's talking to everyone, you'd be surprised what you find," says Anna Collier.



Sydney-Chip

Outgrowing her pony and in need of a steady mount, the Collier's found Trick or Treat Rebel Chip, a brown and white Paint with warmblood looks, in Arizona. "This is the one," said Sydney after a trial ride. "He didn't care about my left side. My leg felt stiller on him." He is also kind, she reports, and lifts his lip for kisses. Working with her trainer Pam Bauer of German Magic Farm, Dundee MI, Sydney and Chip started with a dressage schooling show and two rated shows last fall riding Intro B, the individual and team test. She still loves jumping and is waiting on an adapted saddle to make it safer.

The Accidental Knapstrupper Stallion

Sydney and her parents took full advantage of the Dressage Affaire CDI and CPEDI3* running together. From early morning to late afternoon, they soaked up the rides in Ring 1 watching para-riders from the U.S., Canada and Mexico followed by the likes of Shannon Peters, Jan Ebeling and Guenther Seidel.



Of special interest, a 2001 Knabstrupper stallion, VPrH Pegasus VOM Niehous-HOF (VPrH Pergamon; dam sire VPrH Apollon), ridden by Laurietta Oakleaf. The Grade 1b para-rider had networked furiously after having to turn back her trailer with her own two horses in Ohio due to torrential flooding. After calling every barn on the California Dressage Society list without

success, a woman she met at her hotel handed her two phone numbers.

Trainer Rebecca Cook responded 10 minutes later that she had one horse with the required national passport. Oakleaf tried the horse imported in 2006 by Patrick Truxillo and Diane Nilson of Baroque 'N Dreams in Anza, CA the next morning. "Even if it wasn't going to work, I was going to make it work," said Oakleaf who is a determined competitor. She uses full leg braces and a wheelchair for mobility as she deals with CIDP, fibromyalgia and treatment for lymphoma. "Horses are my legs now," says Oakleaf.



The owners describe Pegasus as still a novice when it comes to going to shows and events but when they heard the tests were walk/trot, they felt comfortable that he could meet those expectations. Oakleaf had the advantage of riding her own PRE and Fresian stallions and knowing the importance of keeping their attention, being very aware of other horses and not getting boxed in.

With only a half dozen rides together, Pegasus and Oakleaf looked like a polished pair and earned two qualifying scores for the London 2012 Paralympic selection trials. "He went out there and put his heart and soul into each of those rides and we couldn't be prouder of him," beamed Truxillo. The serendipity of finding a quality horse, willing owners, a brave rider, networking and persistence paid off not only for Laurietta who is extremely grateful

for everyone's efforts that allowed her a chance to compete successfully but Pegasus would also serve as Sydney's clinic mount.

A Riding High



Para Dressage judge from the Netherlands, Hanneke Gerritsen, checks Sydney's reins.

Sydney's parents may have felt a flutter of hesitation watching their 13 year-old impaired daughter climb aboard a loudly vocal stallion but his owner and trainer had no doubts. "We knew Pegasus could do it but he'd never had riders with such special needs on him. ...What was so unexpected was the level of response and intuitiveness he exhibited with each rider, and it seemed to be what he wanted to do," says Truxillo.

Sydney impressed trainer Rebecca Cook and Pegasus' owner with her attitude.

"She came to the barn and spent time loving on the horse before she rode," noted Cook. Truxillo thought Sydney was quite mature and capable for her age. "I'm certain that she's a normal kid when

she's doing other things, but in this venue, she's definitely in a zone. Watching her excitement knowing that she was going to get to ride Pegasus at the clinic, and then actually seeing that happen will always be a highlight in my life. The way she and Pegasus looked out there in the clinic was moving and inspirational.”



Vocal but behaved, everyone watching the clinic noticed the instant bond Pegasus felt with Sydney on board. Debbie McDonald got right to work on connection on a circle. Sydney uses reins with looped ends for easier grasping but cannot change the rein length except by lifting or lowering her arms. Her left arm is very unstable and McDonald repeatedly cued her to mentally drop the arm without losing contact and bending without crossing the reins over the neck.

It didn't take long for the duo to get in sync and earn McDonald's praise. "You have very good feel and focus, you just need to become aware of fixing little things. There is nothing you can't overcome," said McDonald in a confident tone. As Sydney collected and powered up a forward, flowing, floating trot on the proud stallion, the small audience watched spellbound.

“Any trainer can have a Grand Prix horse in their barn, how many horses can do this?” Becky Cooper asked quietly, with her hand resting over her heart.

This is the special bonus of para-dressage. We all saw the harmony and trust bloom between horse and rider. In the sun, beside the dirt ring, we shared their joy and we all felt connected.



Rebecca Cook and Sydney after her lesson with Debbie McDonald.

For Sydney's parents, Mom Anna who manages her website and fundraising, and Dad, Dave a psychologist who works in the correctional facility in Ann Arbor, it's all about doing everything they can to be sure their daughter has her dream and life with horses. To save money on the trip they stayed with friends in California, made sandwiches for lunch, and volunteered by working in the barn helping the other para participants with their horses. "When I see that smile on her face," said Mom Anna, "It makes all of this worth while."

For more info - www.sydsparaquest.com [3]



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