

The Quest for the Cup

By Carol Paquette

Competing in a horse show takes dedication and nerve. Now imagine what it took for seven riders, with challenges ranging from Asperger's to Down syndrome, and their mounts to travel from Michigan to Kansas City, Missouri to compete in the United Professional Horsemen's Association (UPHA) Exceptional Challenge Cup.

These young men and ladies were up to the task: Sergey Douglas, 14, of Troy; Danny Moloney, 17, of Clarkston; Caitlin O'Reilly, 20, of Rochester Hills; Sarrah Palmer, 30, of Oxford; Andrew Paquette, 18, of White Lake; Tisbe Pizani, 16, of Lake Orion; and Savanna Rovelli, 14, of West Bloomfield. They had already demonstrated their dedication by achieving independent status at O.A.T.S., a NARHA premier center in Clarkston, Mich.

Get ready, get set, go

In the weeks leading up to the show, the riders worked on improving their riding skills: seat, willingness and ability to trot, proper position of hands and feet, posting on the correct diagonal and using the whole arena. Their progress over a short period of time was amazing. They also were asked to take on more responsibility for caring for the horse that would be their partner for the show.

As the riders worked hard, so did the instructors, moms, dads and other volunteers to prepare for this huge endeavor. Although the UPHA funds the horses' transport and show and stall fees, the rest is up to those competing.

Instructors worked diligently to gather the necessary information so the riders would know what to do, how to present themselves, and what to wear. Parents coordinated hotel rooms, travel arrangements and outfitted their riders with the proper show clothing. English saddles, pads and bridles had to be borrowed. Horse transport was arranged. The riders polished their tack and helped trim and groom their horses for the show.

On a cold, dark and rainy November night, riders and volunteers walked the horses out to the transport truck for the trip to Kansas City. It was time for O.A.T.S. to go national.

Perspiration and inspiration

Following the initial excitement of arriving at Kemper Arena, it was business as usual caring for the horses. Led by instructors Nancy Heussner and Beth Pellerito and assisted by volunteers Lynn Daniels and Ann Ettinger, all of the riders helped groom, tack, clean up after and feed and water their horses. There was no complaining. It was rewarding to see the riders bond with their horses as the days passed.

The stalls were in the practice ring area, and the O.A.T.S. riders' eyes widened when they saw the high-stepping Saddlebred horses and their fancily-clad riders. Instead of being intimidated, they were impressed, and worked even harder. Hands came down and were quieter. Riders who never stayed on the rail were glued to it. Feet were in proper position and posting was on the beat. Everyone sat up tall. They rode twice a day in the practice arena and the two days before show day practiced in Kemper Arena where they would be competing.

Fast friends

While riding skills certainly improved, how the competitors interacted with one another proved to be one of the biggest transformations that week. The riders had known each other for several years, but had never really socialized with each other before. They were together at meals, in the hotel and helping each other with their horses. They became friends.

They talked and laughed together, planned activities and arranged to meet each other for “parties” and swimming, told stories and jokes, sang, danced and had a ball. Most importantly, they all supported and cheered each other on. They also had the opportunity to meet other riders, from Florida, Missouri and California.

The winner’s circle

The O.A.T.S. riders competed with composure that belied their disabilities, and rode at levels far above where they were a mere two months before the show. The O.A.T.S. horses deserve hearty praises as well. Three of the competitors from O.A.T.S. made the final 10 out of 14 entries: Sergey, Caitlin and Andrew, who ultimately was awarded Reserve National Champion for the non-physically challenged.

Perhaps the most rewarding result of participating in this show was learning that UPHA officials commented favorably on how the O.A.T.S. riders, families and instructors conducted themselves and dressed for the occasion. They were amazed at the camaraderie exhibited. To be sure, the growth observed in the riders, in horsemanship and social skills, was tremendous and so much fun to watch.

Everyone involved would like to extend a great big thank you to the UPHA for making this experience possible, and to Nancy and the O.A.T.S program for preparing the riders over the years, and for having the best horses around.

Postscript: This story is dedicated to Mattie and Deemer, two of the O.A.T.S. horses who made the trip to Kansas City and took their riders to the finals (Sergey and Deemer) and the reserve championship (Andrew and Mattie). Mattie passed away unexpectedly in December; Deemer in January. They are both greatly missed.

SIDEBAR

The Exceptional Challenge Cup is a division of the United Professional Horsemen’s Association (UPHA) National Challenge Cup competition, held annually at the American Royal Horse Show in Kansas City, Missouri. The class is open to all English equitation riders 12 years of age and over, with a mental or physical handicap, riding a mare or gelding of any breed. Riders are required to walk and trot on the rail, post and ride a serpentine (riders who have been judged in a class at a recognized or non-recognized show that required a canter are ineligible).

Riders are responsible for their own transportation and lodging; the UPHA covers stall, entry and office fees, as well as equine transportation. The UPHA awards a \$2000 scholarship to the Champion, \$1000 to the Reserve Champion and \$500 to the remaining top eight riders that can be used for their riding program or college expenses. For more information, visit

www.uptaonline.com.