

Not HORSE Around



Para equestrian is not only a sport that focuses on precision and poise, but one that also can become therapeutic — especially for those with spinal-cord injuries or disease.

by Jennifer Best

Horses have long been recognized as useful tools in physical and emotional therapy.

Interaction with them has brought people confidence and restful focus. Riding them has increased people's core strength, balance, physical fitness and active focus. Driving them provides both interspecies communication and manual dexterity. Rising from the level of therapeutic equestrian to elite para equestrian brings all these benefits, but at no small cost; it takes incomparable dedication, grit, perseverance and sponsorships.

"At this point, it's an arms race. The horses that compete in para dressage internationally are some of the fanciest dressage horses you'll ever see. They're what separates the men from the boys," says Margaret "Gigi" McIntosh, who competed as a member of the U.S. Para-Equestrian Team at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

More Like A Ballet

Dressage is an equestrian event in which tightly coifed, well-manicured, smartly dressed riders of mus-

cular horses turn with precision, ride perfect 20-meter circles, flow from walk to trot to canter and back again, all while maintaining their posture and composure with no apparent exertion. Communication between horse and rider is honed to perfection, and an award-winning performance is closer to a ballet than a day at the rodeo.

"It's a time commitment. You can take your riding lesson once a week and enjoy the horse, build a relationship with your horse, or you can really search yourself and where your desire is and if that desire is to truly become an equestrian, you need to be willing to put in the time. No one becomes an elite athlete without putting in many hours of riding, just like the training for any other sport," says Renee Dixon, founder of Freedom Hills Therapeutic Riding Program in Port Deposit, Md.

Some riders come to the sport through family, country living or a childhood equestrian affinity that grows into an adulthood obsession. Others come to it



Alanna Flax-Clark, above and below, discovered para equestrian through physical therapy. Flax-Clark, pictured with her horse, El Paso, has no use of her hands, weakness in her arms and no use of her legs.

by happen-
stance. Then,
they're hooked.
McIntosh had
been riding most of
her life, rising through the
ranks in the eventing world to
arrive on the U.S. Equestrian Team's
long list for the 1990 Pan American Games. She com-
peted consistently in the highest echelons of event-
ing, consisting of three disciplines of dressage, cross-
country and show jumping, until she and her mount
fell during a spring 1999 competition.

"I'm textbook C6, but incomplete, compromised
from the chest down. Originally, my hands were
weak, my lungs were affected, I couldn't move any-
thing from my chest down, but after six weeks in
rehab with intensive physical therapy, I could walk
with a walker," she says.

McIntosh thought her days with horses were
over until her eventing competitor, Jane Cory,



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COURTESY OF ALANNA FLAX-CLARK



GINNY DIXON

A Team USA para equestrian member, Alanna Flax-Clark is a Grade II para equestrian and was Grade II National Champion in 2020.

owner of Cort Center for Therapeutic Riding at Pleasant Hollow Farm near Coopersburg, Pa., paired McIntosh with Missy Ranshousen, the U.S. Paralympic team coach.

"The most important thing is to find the right coach," McIntosh says. "The right coach is someone who has your best interest at heart, someone who's willing

to work with your disability, someone who is willing to take the time to work with you until you get it right, someone who teaches you to take care of the most important part: the horse."

That's precisely the goal for trainer Sara Schmitt of Sara Schmitt Dressage at On the Centerline Farm in Califon, N.J.

"Find a trainer that you click with and who supports your styles and your needs and desires and doesn't want to change you too much," Schmitt says. "You have to understand that if you don't do your homework, you don't go to the shows. If you're not willing to put that time into it, you're not going to reach the highest levels."

Discovering Something New

Case in point, Alanna Flax-Clark is a relative newcomer to para dressage, but one with her eye on World Championships and the Paralympic Games.

"I've seen her come sick, not even able to lift her arms, but she still wants to be put on her horse," Schmitt says.

Flax-Clark set her sights on the 2020 Paralympic Games after discovering the equestrian lifestyle through physical therapy.

"I didn't know anything about horses. It wasn't my world. My mom was scared of horses, so they weren't part of my life," Flax-Clark says from her winter home in Florida.

Then, at age 13, she was diagnosed with a neurological disease that affected her bones, muscles, nerves, skin and blood vessels. She made progress toward recovery, but in 2007, at age 24, an influenza-like virus attacked her nerves, resulting in injuries similar, she says, to quadriplegia. She still doesn't have use of her hands, has weakness in her arms and no use of her legs.

"My core was initially all over the place. I couldn't push my wheelchair at all in the beginning. Rehab wasn't getting me anywhere at a point in my life when I had so much frustration," Flax-Clark says. "I



COURTESY OF RILEY GARRETT

A para equestrian Grade III, Riley Garrett rides her horse, Van Gogh.



Riley Garrett, who was born with bethlem myopathy, a rare disease affecting the skeletal muscles and connective tissue, rides her warmblood horse, Piston.

On Therapeutic Horsemanship, a U.S. Equestrian Federation/U.S. Para Equestrian Association National Para-Equestrian Dressage Center of Excellence in Chatsworth, Calif.

"I was wanting to come back, actually enjoying myself, the horses, the people, everything about it where, with other therapies, I had no motivation to go. It was more like a community and a family you're part of," Flax-Clark says.

Confidence-Booster

As her skills advanced and her interest continued to grow, horses increased her confidence, and she entered the show ring. Flax-Clark learned

about dressage as an event in the Paralympic Games. She attended clinics with various Paralympic judges and para equestrian coaches from all over the world. She moved to an Indiana farm and met other high-caliber para equestrian athletes, such as three-time Paralympian Diane Kastama.

Alanna Flax-Clark, rides her horse, El Paso, while trainer Sara Schmitt walks beside them.

wanted to get more independence and more of my life back."

As a special education teacher, Flax-Clark had many students who had taken part in equestrian therapy sessions.

"It was such a highlight of their week, and I've always been an outdoor person. I figured this was something that would get me out of PT/OT/speech therapy and get me outside, and I believe if you're motivated by something, no matter how crazy it is, it's going to help you more," Flax-Clark says.

Although she didn't have the strength to keep her head from flopping, and her side walkers had to right her several times as her core left her sagging in the seat, Flax-Clark says she felt an immediate change in her progress, in no small part because of the special bond that's built between horse and rider.

"They connect with you on a different level. You don't have to speak to them, and that's what I needed at the time because I was having trouble with my speech. I didn't feel like the therapy was as much of a struggle, but it was a huge workout," Flax-Clark says. "I didn't know what I was doing, but I was doing something, and if someone asked me what I was doing those days, I didn't have to give the same old physical therapy report. I could say, 'I rode my horse.'"

She saw little changes every week, which drove her to return time and time again to Ride





COURTESY OF RILEY GARRETT

Riley Garrett on her horse, Van Gogh, while horse trainer/coach Carole Laulis holds the pair's winning ribbons.

Those opportunities led her to a 2018 show season with venues that stretched from Wellington, Fla., through North Carolina, New York and into Canada. She settled in New Jersey with her trainer, Schmitt, and continues that working relationship today.

"You can go crazy and spend millions of dollars, but it doesn't matter how much money you can throw at it," Schmitt says. "If you

don't have the talent nor the desire, you couldn't make it. I think Alanna has really good feet and good seat naturally. She rides through the nerves and doesn't let them get in her way."

While working as a freelance diversity and inclusion advocate, maintaining modeling, acting, speaking and therapeutic riding center jobs, Flax-Clark rides five or six days per week, trains off the horse with pilates, explores trails with her manual chair, manages her stress, sticks to a sleep schedule and stretches — a lot.

"My muscles get so tight and spasmy. I stretch morning and night. Massage is really important for that, too," Flax-Clark says. "Anything to get me loose and limber, so I can be easier for [her horse El Paso] Taco to carry and help me with my pain also."

She's also frugal.

"Some people have huge social lives, take lavish vacations. I'm good at saving money, and the money I have goes to my horse," Flax-Clark says.

Riders worth their salt prove themselves in the arena. Sponsorships and grants may follow for those who seek them.

"Becca [Hart] has a wonderful sponsor who bought a horse for her in Germany. Sydney Collier is sponsored by Georgina Bloomberg. Thankfully, there are sponsors like this who have a passion for our sport and very deep pockets that help the U.S. team be competitive," McIntosh says.

The costs cannot be understated, but neither can the potential for sponsorships and partnerships.

"When they had trials in North Carolina, the local community, dressage trainers and farms donated their horses for the competition so these young people could ride," says United States Equestrian Federation Para Dressage Coach Carole Laulis, a volunteer coordinator at Thorncroft Equestrian Center in Malvern, Pa.

Such "catch riding" creates more of a challenge in that the horse and rider haven't built their relationship and communication over the course of years, rather in a matter of days.

But the practice can also result in better riders, like Riley Garrett, who worked with Laulis before

moving on to other training facilities and coaches as she rose to her current rank as a member of the U.S. Para-Equestrian Team.

"My riding has changed significantly from being just a competitor to thinking strategically and technically," Garrett says. "My favorite part of it is the improvement of myself, from the start of the season to the end, the consistency, watching myself grow and all the other people around me."

The help is out there.

"Reach out to most of the para riders," Flax-Clark says. "They're always happy to speak to you if you want to learn more."

For more information about riding, training, finding coaches or rising beyond therapeutic riding, visit uspea.org.



COURTESY OF RILEY GARRETT

Carole Laulis, left, serves as a U.S. Equestrian Federation Para Dressage coach.