

The Paralympic Experience - One Road Ends, Another Begins

By Sandra Verda, Fit To Ride

The Atmosphere

With the steep climb to the Paralympics over and after having some time to reflect on this monumental experience three words come to mind: sportsmanship, camaraderie and competition. The Paralympics were a true testimony to the definition of each of these words. To watch the strength and elegance of magnificent horses, the focus and passion of dedicated coaches and the determination and drive of talented riders was truly inspirational. The teamwork that produced harmonious presentations at the most elite levels both in training and ultimately in the competition arena was exemplary.

I may not be able to clearly articulate the feeling I got when during training one day, Dior and I halted on the centreline at X and looked around. This is where at the Olympic Games two weeks before, the world's best riders stood. The next day it would be Lauren and Dior's turn; I felt a combination of happiness, pride, joy, adrenalin, excitement and apprehension... The time had come for Lauren to fulfil her dream of riding at the Paralympic Games.

The journey that started 4 years ago after a tragic, life-altering accident had now manifested into a dream come true. And to top it all off, who would have thought that we would make the most important stretch of our journey with our equine partner, Dior, who due to an injury had been on the verge of retirement. Lauren and I often joke that if Dior had known what this agreement would entail... traveling for hours and hours to foreign countries on airplanes, being on the middle of the tarmac, lifted high into the air in a box like a piece of cargo, we are sure he would have reconsidered and started limping or something! But after a successful dressage career through the levels to Grand Prix with his owner Andrea Taylor; and being short-listed for the Olympics several times everything just seemed to fit. What a spectacular way to wrap up his international career! This does not mean that now that the Paralympics are over Dior is finished competing, it simply means he won't make the trip to Beijing for the 2008 Paralympics - we promised him that! He and Lauren will continue to compete locally at Equine Canada recognized shows throughout the 2005 season.

The Competition Venue

Having the Paralympics and Olympics organized by the same Organizing Committee for the first time in history, lent itself to a smoothly run event that catered to the needs of the grooms and the well-being of the horses. The security was excellent, knowing that the Paralympic staff and volunteers took shifts throughout the night to monitor the horses allowed those of us living at the venue to sleep well after our last evening check. The Markopoulo Equestrian Centre was designed with the comfort and health of horses in mind. The stalls were large and a high roof equipped with fans allowed for good

ventilation. The only downfall to the venue was the long walk up the hill to the competition and training arenas. Believe me, if you were not on a horse it was quite the walk! However, we managed it with a bit of resourcefulness and some excellent cardio training for those of us pushing wheelchairs up! Quite often you would see an athlete from one country in a manual chair being pulled up the hill by another athlete from an opposing country on a scooter or in an electric wheelchair, so it all worked out and everyone got where they needed to!

The Performance

Lauren and Dior had good performances and produced highly respectable scores amongst tough competition. On September 22 in the Individual Championship Test they scored 68% which placed them 7th. The bronze medal score was 68.7%, the silver medal was 70.5% and the gold medal was 72.6%. Lauren rode an accurate test and Dior was solid, showing good lengthening at trot and smooth transitions. Their scores were 7's and 8's throughout except that they did not nail their immobile halts on centreline. These were mistakes that cost them several crucial marks and a medal placing. So close, yet so far away! It reminds me of a conversation Lauren and I had with one of our fellow Grade II competitors, he said "because the top ranked riders all have extremely good horses and we have all proven that we can ride our butts off, what it really boils down to is who has the best ride that articular day". So true, past performances are null and void, today is a new day, a new test and there are so many variables you never know what to expect! Ah the spirit of competition!

Two days later in the Musical Freestyle Lauren and Dior finished 6th with a score of 73.05%. Riders from Sweden, Great Britain, Germany and the Netherlands were in the top five places. Lauren and Dior gave a great performance and there were several comments about the choice of music and how well it suited Dior's movement. We had actually incorporated some of the trot music that Andrea had used previously for her Grand Prix Kur. It was neat to watch because it was evident that Dior knew the music - he lit up and his movement became even more expressive when the music began to build for the medium trot!

The Outcome

Although Lauren did not win a medal at these games I believe she gained something even more valuable; she demonstrated a significant level of maturity in her riding and competition preparation that I feel will be a turning point in her riding career. With the experience she has gained and the performances she produced she has proven not only to others but most importantly to herself that she is competitive against the world's best Paralympic riders. This has given her confidence and the realization that this is just the beginning of an exciting journey in the world of dressage!

Lauren and I are looking forward to the next part of our journey and want to sincerely thank everyone who made this dream a reality. A very special thank you must go out to Dior's owner Andrea Taylor who, through years of training, dedication and commitment,

produced a top quality dressage horse with an excellent work ethic that allowed him to adapt easily to his new career as a Paralympian! Dior won the hearts of everyone and definitely made his mark in Athens.

Special congratulations to Karen Brain, Canada's Grade IV rider who won two bronze medals and gave some fantastic performances abroad Dasskara. Thanks to Conrad Schumacher for his expertise and insight when I rode Dior! Thanks to the rest of the Canadian team - Gary, Helen, Ingrid, Jane, Mary, Dax, Flo and Judy. It was a pleasure to work with all of you.

Thanks to Cara Hudson, Administrator of Fit To Ride and Riding for Gold, you are a gem and we could not have done it without you! To all my clients of Fit To Ride, thanks for your flexibility and understanding; here's to an exciting 2005 show season!