



SHIFTING THE 2020 VISION

Looking to Tokyo and Beyond

In January 2020, the NetJets U.S. Show Jumping team started the year with a singular focus, the Tokyo Olympic Games in August. When COVID-19 entered the picture, however, the world seemed to stand still as daily activities, including sports, halted, and the health and safety of people worldwide took center stage.

Since then, as sport has begun to resume, the Olympic equestrian disciplines have entered a period of revision and planning. Not only are the U.S. teams focused on the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games rescheduled for 2021, they are preparing for the 2022 World Championships, the first opportunity for the U.S. to qualify for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. As Director of Sport for US Equestrian (USEF) Will Connell outlines in his Road to LA28 plan, 2021 is a year of double vision, given these two overlapping competition timelines, and is also a critical inflection point that requires our teams to have a clear and comprehensive long-term strategy if we expect our teams to deliver sustained medal-winning success going forward.

As the philanthropic partner of US Equestrian, the U.S. Equestrian Team (USET) Foundation was created

in part to help support USEF's High Performance programs and to help USEF fund and develop a robust pathway for Developing and Emerging athletes as they begin their journey to representing the United States in international competition and on the podium. To further this mission, the USET Foundation launched "Raising the Bar" in the first half of 2020 as a comprehensive campaign designed to sustain greatness in high performance programs and to invest in future talent leading up to the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

It is expected that 2021 will be the costliest year in the USET Foundation's history in part because the expenses related to the rescheduled Olympic Games and championships will need to be replicated, and as a result, the Raising the Bar campaign has been extended through the first half of the year and will remain a critical part of enabling U.S. horses and athletes to excel at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games.

"The year is not without its challenges, but I am continually impressed by the collective efforts to get our athletes on the podium," said USET Foundation Executive Director Bonnie Jenkins.

“The USET Foundation is unwavering in its commitment to our teams, and I’m deeply appreciative to all who have continued to support the mission during these unprecedented times.”

For the athletes, the rescheduled Olympic Games gave way to new plans. For McLain Ward, it gave him the opportunity to reevaluate his Olympic horsepower.

“[2016 Olympic team silver medalist] HH Azur is getting older, and you have to make plans for older horses’ careers to have them fresh for one more season,” said Ward. “I made the decision to not show her for the rest of 2020, not because of physical reasons, but because I want her to have a fresh set of legs for 2021 and take another swing at the Olympic Games.

We let her rest more than we ever have [because of the postponement], and now we will start to bring her back.”

The Olympic Games in Tokyo will be the debut of a new championship format, with just three-athlete teams and no drop score for the team competition. In addition, the individual medals will be decided before the team competition. The new format will change the dynamics of the competition, and because fielding the best team possible for 2021 will remain a priority, the need is even greater to have a clear plan to nurture and develop talent as we simultaneously plan for the 2022 World Championships and 2024 Olympic Games.

The US Equestrian selection process for the Tokyo show jumping team will involve a short list of 10 athletes and horses, which will be finalized in April after the Winter Equestrian Festival season.

The short-listed athletes and horses will then compete at designated events and be observed by U.S. show jumping chef d’equipe, Robert Ridland, and a panel of Advisors, who will recommend three athlete/horse combinations and one alternate



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for the Individual and Team Competitions.

“It’s open to everybody who is possibly going to give us the best chance,” Ridland said. “I think going into it, we have good depth. We all learned how to ‘pivot’ this year, and I believe that our greatest strength is that of adaptability. We are heading into back-to-back championship years, so we will be depending on our depth of horse/rider combinations and making contingency plans as we go.”

“All of the riders had to change plans in 2020,” said Ridland. “Some riders took the opportunity to rest their horses while others with younger, newer horses took the opportunity to show and give them experience. I think everyone, including those targeting Tokyo, have taken a look at the long-term

picture and revised their plans. This year has been challenging not only for the athletes, but also for the owners, and I must give credit and recognition to them. With plans constantly changing and restrictions due to the pandemic, the unwavering support of the owners has been remarkable.”

Depth is more critical now than ever with the changing landscape that COVID has wrought.

“Sometimes luck doesn’t go your way, but we clearly have athletes that have delivered under pressure at Games and Finals,” concluded Ridland. “There’s no question about that. Our next generation of riders has been proving themselves well over the last few years, so I’m hoping our depth serves us well going forward. I’m excited about 2021. Our focus on the podium is sharper than ever.”

The USET Foundation is a nonprofit organization that supports the competition, training, coaching, travel, and educational needs of America’s elite and developing international and high performance horses and athletes in partnership with US Equestrian. For more information, please visit www.uset.org.