

FEATURE

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The Road to the Podium Begins With a Solid Foundation

In late 2003, the United States Equestrian Team (USET) Foundation was named the philanthropic partner to the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF). In this role, USEF Foundation's singular mission became fundraising for the USEF High Performance programs that lay the groundwork for how the U.S. supports equestrian athlete development and prepares our country's elite for podium finishes at major competitions, such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games, Pan American Games, World Championships, and Nations Cup competitions. Although the U.S. equestrian team's goal is a podium finish, USEF Foundation's Executive Director Bonnie Jenkins is quick to point out a common misconception about the foundation's efforts.

"The Olympic and Paralympic Games are extremely important; however, the role of the USET Foundation is not just these pinnacle competitions," shared Jenkins. "If we want to do well as a nation in years to come, we need to ensure our pipeline of athletes and horses is strong – and we need to be able to give our younger, talented athletes the experiences and training that will help them be successful at a major event like the Olympics."

Enter the Pathway Programs. Designed to support emerging, developing, and elite athletes, they are what ensure the strength and success of U.S. equestrian teams in years to come. The USET Foundation, thanks to generous supporters and donors, provides over 50% of the funding for these High Performance Pathway Programs each year.

"The absence of a pathway program has been the downfall of so many [other nations'] teams," explained U.S. Show Jumping Chef d'Equipe Robert Ridland, who is credited with implementing the 3-2 methodology of choosing three team members from the Rolex/USEF Show Jumping ranking list and two less experienced riders, at the selectors' discretion. "The top of our sport cannot be a closed shop just for veteran riders that have gold medals. Otherwise, you're going to wake up one day and wonder where everyone went. Our whole preparation and [U.S. team] selection process offers opportunity for younger riders at the top."

Before riders get to the top, however, the Pathway Programs, such as the North American Youth Championships, the USEF

Horsemastership Training Series for jumping, the USEF European Young Rider Tour for dressage, the USEF Development, Pre-Elite, and Elite Training Lists and Eventing Youth Team Challenge competitions for eventing, and the Para Dressage Emerging Athlete Program, to name a few, give our country's coaches the ability to guide younger athletes.

In his program, U.S. Eventing Performance Director Erik Duvander has created opportunities for greener riders to learn from more seasoned athletes by working closely with U.S. Eventing Development and Emerging Athletes Coach Leslie Law. "I believe it's very important [that riders in the] Under 25 or Development Program have a connection to High Performance, and that it doesn't feel like the step is too far away," said Duvander. "I think this is an aspect that we have improved upon year over year."

For show jumping, the Pathway Programs started to thrive in 2013 when Ridland became the U.S. Show Jumping Chef d'Equipe. By 2015, with the support of USEF Show Jumping Youth Chef d'Equipe and United States Hunter Jumper Association (USHJA) Technical Advisor DiAnn Langer, they began to present young riders with tangible benchmarks and opportunities for a clear, upward trajectory.

USEF Dressage Technical Advisor Debbie McDonald also feels strongly that the

Pathway Programs are working as intended. "The Pathway Programs have given [Pathway Program coaches] an opportunity to see how riders are progressing and to keep eyes on the younger riders to make sure their pathway is directed in a way that is going to be successful for them," she said. "Without these Programs, we wouldn't have the depth [in U.S. dressage talent] that we have now."

"This is the strongest group of horses and riders we've ever had going into an [Olympic Games]," continued McDonald, speaking of the U.S. dressage shortlist for the Olympic Games in Tokyo. "It is a product of the programs we're offering."

According to USEF Jumping Managing Director Lizzy Chesson, success on the Pathway comes from offering young riders guidance wherever they are in the journey. For jumping, that means working with Langer as a young rider, before progressing to further development under the tutelage of five-time Olympian and two-time Olympic silver medalist, Anne Kursinski, who serves as USEF's assistant jumping coach and development technical advisor. "You have three key people in Langer, Kursinski, and Ridland that have constant communication [with riders as they progress]," said Chesson. "We know who they were when they were younger, and we keep guiding them along."

For McDonald, the Programs provide a means to stay more connected to riders every step of the way, and from her perspective, it's paid dividends. "We're much more involved now [than in years past] in staying apprised of the riders' results, [ensuring] that their pathway is going the way we want, and that their trajectory is going up and not down. It's been everything for us."

Para dressage continues to gain momentum in the U.S. Para-Equestrian Dressage Technical Advisor and Head of Coach Development, Michel Assouline hopes to continue to build on the country's well-structured program. Prior to joining USEF, Assouline spent nearly 13 years as head coach to the British para dressage program, which won four silver and seven gold medals at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He notes, however, that the British program was well-funded by the government.

As the Olympic and Paralympic equestrian disciplines in the U.S. do not receive government funding, support from the USET Foundation and USEF is critical.

"It's become very clear that our Pathway Programs are working, so I think we should be very excited about the Games this year and what's to come for Paris 2024 and LA 2028," continued Jenkins. "However, we have to keep developing our athletes and horses – you can't take a year off from that." **HS**



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