

U.S. DRESSAGE AND PARA DRESSAGE TEAMS

Make History at Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2021

By Nancy Jaffer

It was a feat of organization and hard work to make the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games and Paralympic Games a success under the most difficult conditions ever experienced for such championships. With the Games' one-year postponement due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the myriad travel changes that ensued, the U.S. athletes and the team behind them rose to the challenge and achieved a remarkable result. Part of that team includes the USET Foundation, the philanthropic partner of US Equestrian (USEF), which helps fund the U.S. teams and programs, as well as the development pathway, through charitable gifts and donations by providing grants to USEF annually.

The support from USET Foundation in this Olympic cycle was critical; when the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games were moved to 2021, even more funding was needed. Both the dressage and para dressage teams brought home unprecedented podium finishes, and World Number One Roxanne Trunnell's two individual gold medals set a new bar for para dressage sport in our country.

"These have been the most expensive Games I think we have ever done," stated USEF Director



of Sport Will Connell. “Having the funding we did was critical in being able to pull this off.” He noted that USEF CEO Bill Moroney and USET Foundation Executive Director Bonnie Jenkins regularly discussed the situation as they stayed on top of it. Connell briefed the USET Foundation Board of Trustees to keep members up to speed on what was needed financially.

The American riders coped beautifully within the boundaries that were set to prevent infection from the virus, mastering a situation quite unlike their usual competitive mode. “The ability to adapt was key,” said Connell.

The dressage team of first-time Olympian Sabine Schut-Kery on Alice Womble’s Sanceo, with veterans Steffen Peters on Four Winds Farm’s Suppenkasper (aka “Mopsie”), and Adrienne Lyle on Betsy Juliano’s Salvino had to forego what should have been an important part of their preparation, competing in Europe before the Games. COVID-19, again, was the reason.

As a result, Connell said, “We really thought we’d be fighting for bronze. Then to realize we could actually make a grab for silver was incredible.”

It was the first time since the London Olympic Games of 1948, with an all-Army squad competing, that a U.S. dressage team had claimed a medal of that color at the Olympics. The effort was guided by then-Chef d’Equipe Debbie McDonald.

Lyle commented, “This is my second Olympics, but everything is a little bit different with COVID, and the format is completely different, so in a lot of ways it’s all very new. We have a wonderful team, and everyone is so supportive. We train so hard for this and to get to be here and to think about everyone who starts on this journey and being one of three selected to represent this country is awesome. This whole experience has been wonderful.”

“This is exactly what I wanted for my team,” added Peters. “It’s one thing to ride individually, but when you pull a good score for your team it’s an incredible feeling. When we came out of the arena, I gave Mopsie a big hug and thanked him from the bottom of my heart.”

As the anchor combination for the team, Schut-Kery and Sanceo recorded a personal best in the Grand Prix Special to clinch the silver medal.

“This was my first time at the Olympics. I am so



Sabine Schut-Kery and Sanceo

proud of my horse, my team, my owners, and the coaches,” said Schut-Kery. “It’s been a really, really great experience, and I am still a bit speechless. I was filled with joy and pride. It’s such a team effort. It’s a big relief to deliver for the whole team, not just my teammates, but everyone involved, and it meant everything. It was pure happiness.”

For the U.S. para dressage team, the road to a podium finish was years in the making. No American had won a para dressage medal at the Paralympics since Vicki Garner-Sweigert took two golds at the 1996 Atlanta Games, the first time the Paralympic program was held in conjunction with the Olympic program. At that time, riders were aboard borrowed horses. The current system involves riders training for months or years on mounts that they really get to know, paving the way for better performances. The U.S. para dressage program has made great strides since the 2016 Paralympics as well, where they finished 12th as a team.

The USEF and U.S. Para Equestrian Association Centers for Excellence were designated to develop riders for the discipline. In 2017, Michel Assouline was hired as head of para equestrian coach development and high performance consultant. Two years later, he launched the USEF Para Equestrian Dressage Coaches Program.

The result was two individual gold medals in Tokyo for Grade I rider Roxanne Trunnell (riders