



ALL PHOTOS © USEF

U.S. SHOW JUMPING TEAM Finds Success in Tokyo

By Nancy Jaffer

While difficult circumstances abounded at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, the U.S. athletes and the team behind them rose to the occasion to mark a highly successful outing. Part of that team includes the U.S. Equestrian Team 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 the USET Foundation in 2021 was even more critical; with the postponement of the 2020 Olympic Games by a year, more funding was needed to keep athletes and horses at peak condition and ready for championship competition. In addition, the lead-up to the Olympic Games was vastly more complicated than in previous Games due to the COVID-19 complications.

"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.

There were volumes of time-consuming paperwork involved in changing flights and reservations, as well as copious requirements from the organizers.

A major concern upon arrival in Japan was, of course, steering clear of COVID-19, which meant members of the U.S. group needed to remain isolated in their "bubble" for the duration. That was key; several hundred people from around the world who were accredited for the Olympics wound up testing positive for COVID, including more than 20 athletes who missed their events due to positive tests.

"We didn't want to lose the chance to compete by being silly," explained Connell. "It was difficult for everyone across all sports, being in that cocoon."

Restrictions imposed by the COVID-wary Japanese meant no opportunities for sightseeing, visiting restaurants, or socializing with other teams; all the things that usually are such a big part of the Games. And of course, the public was not permitted to attend the competitions, which made the Baji Koen Equestrian Center with its rows of empty seats look like a lonely place in video and photos. However, those associated with the teams and horse owners who were able to be on hand supplied enough

applause and cheers to offer something of an auditory backdrop after each round or test.

The American riders coped beautifully within the boundaries that were set, mastering a situation far different than their usual competitive mode. “The ability to adapt was key,” said Connell.

In show jumping, veterans Laura Kraut on St. Bride’s Farm’s Baloutinue and McLain Ward on Beechwood Stable’s Contagious were joined by Jessica Springsteen, making her Olympic debut, with Stone Hill Farm’s Don Juan van de Donkhoeve. They gave U.S. show jumping its second Olympic team silver in a row; Ward was also on the 2016 Olympic jumping team in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. All three team riders were on horses without any championship experience. Kraut’s success was even more impressive knowing that her relationship with Baloutinue only started four months earlier.

“He was just in the game,” said Kraut following their silver-medal performance. “He was relaxed and focused and did everything I asked of him. He’s one of the best horses I’ve ever had the privilege to ride.”

Kent Farrington, another Rio 2016 veteran who rode in the individual competition in Tokyo, helped out during the team competition in the warm-up area. The squad, under the direction of Coach Robert Ridland, jumped off with Sweden, which edged the U.S. by a mere 1.3 seconds to take the gold—the opposite of what happened in a tie-breaker at the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games in Mill Spring, North Carolina, where the U.S. won the championship.

“Sweden has really been on a different level,” acknowledged Ward. “We would have needed an incredible day to beat them. When you push them to that limit and they still win, you’ve got to be proud with the fight and the medal.”

Ridland agreed, “It just became magical. It was sweet revenge for Sweden, and it’s a great rivalry. They were amazing, and we pushed them to the limit and that’s what has made us proud.”

Connell praised the expertise of Spanish course designer Santiago Varela, whose routes and fences highlighting Japanese culture were key to the way show jumping worked out.

“The course was super technical,” said Springsteen of her ride on the Olympic track set by Varela. “The first time I walked it I made a plan, and that was what I stuck with in the ring.”

The U.S. and Great Britain were the only two nations earning team medals in three of Tokyo’s four equestrian sports, which included para dressage.

Connell noted, “I think people could be inspired by the way these riders dug deep to get those medals.



McLain Ward and Contagious



Laura Kraut and Baloutinue



Jessica Springsteen and Don Juan van de Donkhoeve

People can be inspired by the ability of athletes to perform—and I’m talking cross-sports [when] there’s no spectators, and all the other challenges when you’re locked down in your room. There are many inspirational things to take away from it.”

To support U.S. teams through the USET Foundation, please visit www.USET.org.