

Para-Equestrian Competition Focuses on Abilities

What is para-equestrian competition?

Para-equestrian is a broad term that encompasses horse sports for individuals with a range of disabilities and impairments. Although the name seems to suggest that all para-equestrians are limited by paralysis, disabilities actually encompass a variety of neuromuscular, visual, mental, and anatomic conditions.

According to its mission statement, para-equestrian strives to foster the growth and excellence of international equestrian sport for athletes with a disability. Goals are to develop equestrian sport for people with disabilities, and to provide competition opportunities for riders and drivers with disabilities to enable them to achieve their personal best performance in their chosen discipline.

Watching a dressage test performed by a para-equestrian, a spectator might have difficulty detecting any deviation from the high standard of training and skill achieved by an able-bodied rider. Thus, like any other riding exhibition, para-equestrian showcases the abilities of horse and rider.

How long has this designation been in place?

Some of the first dressage competitions for disabled riders were held in Scandinavia and Great Britain in the 1970s. The first world championship for these riders took place in Sweden. Para-equestrian sport was formally established in 1991 under the guidance of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), and its International Paralympic Equestrian Committee (IPEC) was charged with developing sports and competitions all over the world. Para-equestrians competed at the Olympic Games for the first time in Atlanta in 1996. Para-equestrian became a recognized sport under the Federation Equestre Internationale (FEI), the official international organization that governs horse sports, in 2006. Along with dressage, driving, eventing, jumping, vaulting, reining, and endurance, para-equestrian is now featured at the World Equestrian Games.

What disciplines are included?

Para-equestrians ride in dressage (individual standard tests and musical freestyle as well as team tests for three or four riders) and show-jumping, and participate in various driving events. Driving is not yet included in the Paralympic Games because it is not organized in enough countries, but an international championship competition has been held in conjunction with the World Driving Championship for able-bodied drivers since 1998. Para-equestrian driving follows the general framework of eventing with a day of dressage, a cross-country test with various complex obstacles to be negotiated, and a cones course that combines speed and precision steering to maneuver through a twisting course of narrow clearances. An IPC Carriage Driving sub-committee encourages and supports growth of this discipline around the globe.

How are competitors classified?

Para-equestrian includes riders and drivers with various types and degrees of impairment. In an attempt to ensure fair competition, para-equestrians are graded so that they will be pitted in competition against individuals with similar levels of disability. Once a competitor's Grade is assigned, changes may be made to the classification only if there is a significant shift in disability or impairment.

In dressage, riders may be assigned to one of five Grades, and tests are designed according to the rider's abilities. Thus the most severely disabled athletes are designated Grade Ia, and their tests involve only walking. Grade IV riders are the least disabled, and their tests reflect their increased ability to balance and apply the aids at the walk, trot, and canter.

For driving events, only two Grades are used. Grade I drivers are more severely impaired than those rated as Grade II. A driver's overall strength, balance, and coordination are considered, along with the ability to use arms, legs, and trunk.

In order to establish a Grade, evaluation of a rider's or driver's ability is carried out by an accredited physical therapist or medical doctor with knowledge and training related to the para-equestrian standards. An optical doctor or ophthalmologist must examine riders or drivers who are visually impaired, and para-equestrians with mental impairment have to be evaluated by a psychologist. At the present time, riders with mental impairment may not qualify for FEI international competitions.

What adaptations may be used in competition?

When necessary, riders are allowed to use a variety of special equipment and aids. Saddles may be designed to balance and support a rider; elastic bands are sometimes used to keep feet in stirrups; some riders use a whip in each hand; reins may be adapted in several ways such as adding a connecting rein bar. Blind or visually-impaired show-jumpers may be accompanied by a sighted rider who gives verbal cues throughout the course. For para-equestrian drivers, vehicles have been designed to accommodate wheelchair-bound competitors. Necessary equipment is considered when a para-equestrian's abilities are evaluated, and use of special aids is limited to those that have been formally documented and approved.

How many opportunities are there for para-equestrians to compete?

On a regional and national basis, opportunities to compete vary by country. In 2007, Para-Equestrian Canada began an annual "Sea to Sea Winter Dressage Series Competition" in which riders could send videos of their rides instead of traveling to a particular venue. The videos were judged and classes were placed just as in a more traditional competition. Canada also holds a national para-equestrian dressage championship. Other countries have developed their own schedules of competitions.

Internationally, more opportunities for para-equestrians are becoming available. In 1991 the IPC listed 60 dressage riders and one international competition to which 16 nations sent athletes. By 2005, these numbers had grown significantly: para-equestrians from 38 nations were actively training, and at least 16 international competitions were in place. Today there are world championship competitions for both para-dressage and para-driving, as well as Olympic competition in para-dressage.

For those athletes who have set their sights on wider horizons, IPEC guidelines suggest drivers and dressage riders in Grades III and IV should compete in national competitions for the able-bodied as part of their preparation. Dressage riders with Grades Ia, Ib, and II should compete wherever and whenever possible. Show-jumpers should follow a similar program. Once selected to a national squad, riders must attend training sessions, follow a training program with specified dietary and fitness phases, and work to secure sponsorship or private funding.

How can interested riders and drivers find out more about para-equestrian participation?

Those interested in this program can send questions to the FEI by e-mailing info@horsesport.org. For more information on classification and grades, contact the FEI at www.horsesport.org and check the para-equestrian link. The Classification Manual for Equestrian Competition for Riders with Disabilities has details on contacts and procedures. General rules as well as competition calendars are also available on this site.



**Reprint Courtesy of
Kentucky Equine Research, Inc.**

3910 Delaney Ferry Road
Versailles, KY 40383
Phone: 859-873-1988
Fax: 859-873-3781
Order Department: 800-772-1988
www.ker.com
info@ker.com