

# Para-Equestrians Driving on the Scene



Stefanie Putnam driving Avery in dressage with Scott Monroe.  
Photo by Tom Muehlisen.

By Lindsay McCall

In 1991, a car crash left Diane Kastama paralyzed from the waist down. Although a lifelong horse person and dressage enthusiast, riding without the use of her legs was not an easy task. As any equestrian can identify with, Diane, of Arroyo Grande, California, didn't turn away from the sport she loved. Instead, she looked for another outlet for her passion.

She began to compete in dressage driving and her talent and ambition would push her into the high-performance sport of combined driving. This led her to competing in multiple able-bodied combined driving events. It was the discipline of para-driving that encouraged her to embrace her disability and give the international para-equestrian driving scene a force to be reckoned with.

In 2012, Diane's success earned her a spot on the United States Para-Driving Team, alongside para-drivers Pam Johnson and Karen Gorham. In August 2012, the team, coaches and assistants traveled to the FEI World Para-Equestrian Driving Championships in Breda, The Netherlands. While all the European para-equestrian teams drove their own horses, the U.S. drivers had to lease horses due to the lack of funding provided to the U.S. Team to transport their own horses. The U.S. drivers had only 10 days to learn about their leased horses prior to competing in the World Championships. The United States Para-Driving Team successfully competed over the dressage, cross-country

marathon with an obstacle course and cone driving against the clock. The team placed fourth overall behind The Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain. "Could you imagine where we would have ended up with our own horses?" commented Diane.

The success of the U.S. para-equestrian driving team in 2012 is a direct reflection of the continued growth of the smaller international equestrian disciplines. Diane noted, "Driving is a very welcoming sport for physically disabled athletes. It allows the para-equestrian to compete on equal footing with able-bodied driving athletes. The sport is a great equalizer."

Para-driving opens the doors to disabled athletes by allowing them to get in the carriage and take control of their destiny. When many disabled athletes find themselves unable to ride or they can barely move from the pain in their joints, driving is still accessible. There are quadriplegics driving with wrist cuffs and a quick release seat belt. There are also drivers who were once show jumpers, eventers or dressage riders. Driving is an equal opportunity sport and with a few tweaks of equipment it is open to all.

For former show jumper Stefanie Putnam, of Lafayette, California, para-driving has not only helped her physically, but also emotionally and psychologically. After an accident that left Stefanie as a quadriplegic, she was told she would never ride again. Her love for horses, her family and the support of the United States Driving for the Disabled organization gave her everything she needed to heal from the inside out. Stefanie has noted that

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*Diane Kastama driving her horse Rupert with groom Phylliss Rumley on the dressage course at the Grass Ridge CDE. Photo by Pat Kastama*

the para-driving sport saved her life and made it possible to reach her goals. Stefanie is now on her way to an international ranking with hopes to qualify for the 2014 U.S. Para-Driving Team.

Experienced driver, high performance para-equestrian committee member and 11-time U.S. Chef d'Equipe of the driving team Hardy Zantke has become a strong leader for para-driving. He explains the current obstacles for the sport. "There are too few active athletes and too little financial support. The 2012 calendar year was the first time that para-driving received a small amount of funding from the USEF, but not for horse transportation. Despite having brought home medals from almost every world championship we attended, we have still never received support from USET. All of our vast expenses in 2012 had to be covered by private fundraising or personally by our athletes."

Para-Driving expenses to travel overseas include not only the horse transportation costs and rider costs, but transportation costs for carriages, tack, show fees, assistants, fees for ground transportation such as golf carts or scooters for drivers that can't walk, lodging fees for horse and rider and so much more.

Diane agrees, "There is a large financial demand for the sport. There is also a need for quality horses for our athletes to drive, compete and learn within the United States. The other challenge is the limited number of driving competitions in the United States making it rare for our para-equestrian athletes to compete head to head. We already face the challenge that able-bodied driving

is a fringe equestrian sport in the U.S. - then we add drivers with disabilities into this mix."

Even with so many challenges to overcome, the U.S. para-equestrian drivers are proving themselves year after year on the international driving scene. Their success is due to support from athletes, coaches, volunteers, able-bodied drivers, United States Driving for the Disabled organization, the United States Para-Equestrian Association and international private supporters.

Hardy Zantke concluded, "Hopefully we can increase our financial support and get more equestrians like Diane and Stefanie interested in actively competing in this sport. We would like to help more para-drivers work their way up the competitive ranks at the national level so they are ready for international competition - like the future 2014 World Championship in England. We are thankful to all the support we have and look forward to the future of this discipline."

To learn more about the United States Driving for the Disabled, visit [www.USDFD.org](http://www.USDFD.org).

*About the writer: Lindsay McCall is a lifelong hunter/jumper rider originally from Ohio. She is a talented photographer and makes it her career to advocate for the equestrian sport, especially the para-equestrian discipline, through photography and journalism. Lindsay and her family own and show many horses in multiple disciplines. She enjoys spending her free time with her husband, horses and Labrador Retrievers at her residence in Florida.*

*Diane Kastama driving her horse Rupert with navigator Drew Callahan through a hazard on the marathon course at the Grass Ridge CDE. Photo by Pat Kastama*

