

SHIFTING THE 2020 FOCUS

Looking to Tokyo and Beyond



By Kara Pinato Scro

In January 2020, the Dutta Corp. U.S. Dressage team started the year with a singular focus, the Tokyo Olympic Games in August. When COVID-19 entered the picture, however, the world seemed to stand still as daily activities, including sports, halted, and the health and safety of people worldwide took center stage.

Since then, as sport has begun to resume, the Olympic equestrian disciplines have entered a period of revision and planning. Not only are athletes for the U.S. teams focused on the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games rescheduled for 2021, but they are preparing for the 2022 World Championships, the first opportunity for the U.S. to qualify for the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. As Director of Sport for the US Equestrian Federation (USEF) Will Connell outlines in his Road to 2028 Los Angeles Olympic Games (LA28) plan, 2021 is both a year of double vision, given these two overlapping competition timelines, and is also a critical inflection point that requires our teams to have a clear and comprehensive long-term strategy if we expect our teams to deliver sustained, medal-winning success going forward and to be on the podium at a “home Games.”

As the philanthropic partner of US Equestrian, the United States Equestrian Team (USET) Foundation was created in part to help support USEF’s High Performance programs and to help USEF fund and develop a robust pathway for Developing and Emerging athletes as they begin their journey to representing the United States in international competition and on the podium. To further this mission, the USET Foundation publicly



Debbie McDonald

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launched “Raising the Bar” in the first half of 2020 as a comprehensive campaign designed to sustain greatness in our high performance programs and to invest in future talent leading up to the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

It is expected that 2021 will be the costliest year in the USET Foundation's history in part because the expenses related to the rescheduled Olympic Games and championships will need to be replicated. As a result, the Raising the Bar campaign has been extended through the first half of 2021 and will remain a critical part of enabling U.S. horses and athletes to excel at the 2021 Tokyo Olympic Games.

"The year is not without its challenges, but I am continually impressed by the collective efforts to get our athletes on the podium," said USET Foundation Executive Director Bonnie Jenkins. "The USET Foundation is unwavering in its commitment to our teams, and I'm deeply appreciative to all who have continued to support the mission during these unprecedented times."

According to U.S. Chef d'Équipe Debbie McDonald, the riders handled the postponement of the Games well. "They ended up going to their home bases, decompressed, and gave the horses some time [off]," McDonald said. "They kept their focus on the fact that it was postponed and not completely canceled."

For para dressage rider Rebecca Hart, the downtime allowed her to focus on herself. "I am very date and goal driven, so [this] was a mental challenge for me," she said. "I used it as a teaching moment for my own self-improvement. There's a lot going on in the world, and maybe this was its way of telling us all that we needed to take a moment."

For Adrienne Lyle, the ability to pivot is something she credits to her horse sense. "Horse people are very flexible," she said. "Rarely do things go exactly as planned with horses. That is something that high performance riders are used to. Once the announcement came, which was super disappointing, but the right choice, we all had more important things to worry about, like keeping people healthy and safe."



"You have to focus on the next goal," continued Lyle. "As an athlete, you can't get upset about things that you have no control over."

While some riders were able to refocus their attention to 2021, others, including 2016 Olympic team bronze medalists Laura Graves and Kasey Perry-Glass, will have to set their sights on future Games due to their horses' ages and subsequent retirements.

Despite two of the sport's strongest riders being out of contention, McDonald remains positive about the outlook for the team. "[The postponement] could work out in the younger horses' favor," she said. "[2020] was just a little too early for them, so I'm anxious to see what the younger horses will show us [in the coming months]."

Consistent with the Connell's Road to LA28 plan, McDonald also feels strongly about the need to continue to nurture rider and horse talent. "Having just one horse to bank on is a really tough thing, so a lot of riders are now investing in young horses," she said. "I seriously think we have great depth coming up, and I think 2028 will be perfect timing for some of [the younger horses]."

While there is still uncertainty about how 2021 will play out, McDonald is committed to delivering the best possible team for Tokyo. "It's important for the team to have this goal, or we risk losing momentum," she shared. "We're all moving forward like it's going to happen, and we're training like it's a go."

"The most important thing is that everyone does it right [and follows protocols], so we don't get shut down again," McDonald added. "Everybody has got to do their part or it might not happen, and that would be devastating."

The USET Foundation is a nonprofit organization that supports the competition, training, coaching, travel, and educational needs of America's elite and developing international and high performance horses and athletes in partnership with US Equestrian. For more information, please visit www.uset.org.