

WEEKEND HIGHLIGHTS

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Riders with Disabilities Win Big at Classic

BY SUSAN SAITER SULLIVAN

Long Island riders with disabilities won over the hearts of audiences Monday, as they showcased the skills that brought them to the Hampton Classic.

Alexandria Economou of Muttonville was champion in the Equitation with Aids Class, where riders showed at the walk, trot and performed a figure-eight or poles course with the assistance of a leader. Alex Donlon of Hicksville won the Beginner Spotter/Independent class. Steven Snyder of Brightwaters triumphed in the Advanced Spotter/Independent

Division sponsor Bridgehampton National Bank's CEO and president Kevin O'Connor handed out ribbons and trophies.

Participants in the Long Island Horse Show Series for Riders with Disabilities (LIHSSRD) Finals include children and young adults with a range of psychological, physical, social, learning and emotional disabilities. Riders have overcome such challenges as muscular dystrophy, visual impairments, multiple sclerosis, amputations, paralysis, brain injuries and autism to compete, accumulating points at various other shows to qualify for the Finals at

the Hampton Classic.

The LIHSSRD, co-founded by Katie McGowan, was created to provide riders with disabilities the same competitive experience that other equestrians enjoy. Riders are judged on equitation—the art of horsemanship—as well as demonstration and knowledge of riding skills. McGowan's daughter Emily won the Equitation with Aids championship last year at age eight. This year she won some beautiful ribbons in a higher division.

McGowan founded HorseAbility, a nonprofit that organizes the Long Island Horse Show Series for Riders with Disabilities, in 1993. It was a near-miraculous event that inspired McGowan to create HorseAbility. She had lent her horse to a physical therapist to conduct a hippotherapy session. Hippotherapy is a program that encourages disabled people to ride in order to help them improve physical, occupational and speech skills. "I saw a girl who couldn't walk without crutches get up on my horse, and afterward, she got down and actually walked holding onto her mother's arm," says McGowan.

Creating the program was the accomplishment of a lifetime. "The program was my first baby, then I had children," she says.

Proving the success of the LIHSSRD, many have come a long way, like Bruce Flint, 21 of Brentwood, who got his best ribbon this year, a third place on a pinto named "Reno." As he exited the ring, he cried out to his parents, Alison and Bruce Sr., "I did it!"

Bruce has been riding for ten years. "At first, they were hesitant to take him in the program," said his mother, Alison Flint. Her son is autistic and has several medical issues, including seizures, lack of depth perception and language delays. Team sports were out of the question. It was very tough for him to listen to instructions, especially with the distraction of being on a pony. But it worked out. "Now Bruce is actively participating," Alison said, praising the HorseAbility program. "He's now a very engaged young man. Now, not only does he like being around horses, but also that he's happy to be around people."

"Though he can't be part of a sport team, he is absolutely part of the group when he's riding. He loves taking the horse back to the stall after lessons," Alison said. "And he has a blast every time he rides."

Horseback riding can be risky business for anyone, but Alison developed great trust. "They've made him safe in what could be an unsafe sport." Another bonus has been that he's built more core strength.

She said there is a unique bond that develops between horse and rider, who learns trust, confidence and many other personal skills. It's even been great for bonding between mother and son. "I got tired of just hanging around while he was riding, and now I ride with him," Alison says. "He shows me how to do things. And we have fun chasing each other on a horse!"

Victoria Natale, 22, has been riding since she was six. After she collected her ribbons, she watched the next division from her wheelchair. Mom Rae held the ribbons, noting that "she rode even with a sore wrist that's scheduled for surgery next week!"

Monday began with each rider receiving an award for qualifying for the finals at the Hampton Classic in a series of Long Island shows. It was followed by competition in the three classes calling for differing levels of riding skill and use of spotters, or none. This year was the first that included a jumping division. Riders for this event have access to mounting blocks and ramps to get them on their horse. They use safety stirrups, some with extra width for boots, which may be specially constructed for them. 🐾

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