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Athlete Hart exudes courage

Rebecca Hart found her footing in the saddle. At the 2008 Paralympics in Hong Kong, she secured her hold on a dream -- that a special horse could send her places that her balky legs couldn't.

Hart has familial spastic paraplegia, an inherited condition that makes her gait different than the able-bodied. When she was young, kids mocked her. "It was pretty rough," she said in a 2002 interview. Her sense of humor put the thoughtless children on notice. "I'd turn around if someone was pretending to walk like me and say, 'Well, you're not doing it very well. Do you want a lesson on how to walk like me?' Those made them stop."

Hart didn't just stop those who teased her; she also put into motion a plan to test just how far a horse could take her, in terms of athletic competition and in world travel.

She started formal horseback lessons at age 10, and soon the hobby became a daily habit. She learned how to handle a horse in the ring, and how to clean out the stable. Her parents, Terry Hart and Sue Dobson, helped her compete in events for disabled riders around the country and overseas.

She retired one horse, then another, and helped nurse her current horse, Norteassa, back from a serious leg injury in 2007.

This week, Hart and Norteassa, nicknamed Pippin, made it to the pinnacle of equestrian competition, the Paralympics. Hart, 24, set her sites on the Paralympics at 14. A decade later, she found herself in Hong Kong, going up against fellow athletes who train with the same rigor and determination as those who compete in the regular games. These athletes have physical disabilities, graded by severity. Hart's disability moved her into grade II from grade III, which means that her disability has become more severe.

No matter. Hart performed admirably at the games, finishing 12th in one event, eighth in another and then fourth in the final equestrian event, individual freestyle. Only 2.167 percentage points separated Hart from the woman who grabbed the bronze, Britta Naepel, of Germany.

What separates Hart from the rest of us is her attitude and determination. The best part about going to Hong Kong, she said, was that her older sister Katie flew there from Seattle to cheer her on. "To all my family and friends, I'm eternally grateful," she said.

We're grateful that Hart still calls Erie home.