

On the sideboard in my dining room, there is a photograph of a five year old girl with tangled hair and a slightly uncertain smile, sitting atop a very round little pony. It may seem very ordinary, but it's a picture of magic, of a moment that transformed a life. Near it is a picture of the same girl, a smiling young woman now, sitting atop a horse festooned with ribbons and wearing a blanket announcing that he and his rider, Rebecca Hart, are the National Paralympic dressage champions for 2006. (Her father sometimes comments that that first picture should be labeled: WARNING—You are about to cheerfully exchange your early retirement for an enormous amount of time in cold barns shoveling horse manure.)



Rebecca's first riding lessons were right here at the TREC barn—then known as Hobby Horse Farm. Tail hairs of the patient, good hearted lesson horses she had the privilege to ride here are tucked away in her scrapbook—Roseanne, Seaweed, Skip, and others. Those horses loaned her their legs, since hers were slowly wasting away from Familial Spastic Paraplegia—a rare genetic disease. They gave her joy and self-confidence in a time when she struggled with sorrow as she realized that Spastic Paraplegia can't be fixed and never goes away, and as she discovered in school that it was not always easy to be different. They also ignited a passion for horses and riding that grew stronger each year. She asked us if we could go to a national horse show for disabled riders in Atlanta, Georgia in 1996, and it was there that she met the members of that year's Paralympic Dressage Team. On the way home, holding her own blue ribbons (earned with a borrowed horse from a generous Georgia owner), she asked if we "minded" if she tried to be in the Paralympics herself someday. We said, "Sure—that's a great goal to aim for someday." She said, "Great—I'm planning to aim for 2004."

At this point, her parents had no real idea what dressage was or how to train for it, no horse, and no idea what it took to qualify for a national team. There was no way that was going to stop Rebecca—she learned about dressage, intensified her campaign to get a horse, and researched the qualifying rules and organizations. Within a year, she accumulated enough experience to draw the attention of the national organization and to be placed on the "developing rider" list. In the next few years, with a lot of lessons, tireless practice in heat and cold, and work to help pay for her long-dreamed of "own horse," she made it to her first Paralympic year in 2004, only to learn she had been named first alternate rather than directly to the team. She sat in a field with her horse and shed some tears after the announcement, and then she picked herself up and went back to work.

Horses have taken Becca so many places. They have helped her understand the pride of hard work and achievement, the fun of riding down a country road on a sunny day, the adventure of travel to France, Germany, Belgium, Holland and Greece and competing on International teams, and meeting people from all over the world, and the pleasure of sitting quietly in an aisle, listening to the contented chomping of a barn full of horses. Horses have filled her life with magic moments.

-By Sue Hart