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Hart closes in on dream Erie equestrian rider awaits call from U.S. Paralympic Team

The combination of Rebecca Hart's passion and her 16-year-old horse Norteassa has landed her second national championship.

A place on the 2008 U.S. Paralympic Equestrian Team for the first time could be next.

Erie's Hart, 24, who has familial spastic paraplegia since birth, an affliction that affects the lower body, won the United States Equestrian Federation's National Para Equestrian championship last weekend at the Lamplight Equestrian Center in Wayne, Ill.

Riding on Norteassa, a 16-year-old Hanoverian gelding, Hart guided Norteassa to a final score of 72.473 in the competition.

Veteran Lyn Seidemann and her mount Phoenix B finished second at 71.888.

"He was really focused, and was listening to me," Hart said of Norteassa, a very expensive dressage horse she discovered in Holland in 2004.

Hart, a senior at Penn State Behrend who took this year off to train compete, awaits Thursday's announcement of her likely selection to the 2008 U.S. Paralympic Equestrian team.

"This has been my goal all my life," said Hart, who was an alternate for the 2004 Paralympics in Athens.

Rebecca Eisner, who sponsored a horse for Hart at the 2003 World Championships in Belgium, first let Hart sit on Norteassa, who was a British Reserve-trained horse.

"The first thing I said was, 'I need this horse,' " Hart said Tuesday after returning from Blue Hill Farm in Philadelphia, where Norteassa is stabled. "The horse was already sold, but the man who bought it was sent to Iraq by his company, and said I had first dibs on him. I must say I got him for a very generous price, which I'm thankful for."

The Paralympics run concurrently with the Summer Olympics in Beijing, China, although the equestrian events will be held in Hong Kong since horses are not permitted to be brought into China. Four riders from the U.S. will compete both individually and as a team.

"Riding has always been Becca's passion," said her father, Terry Hart, who has the familial spastic paraplegia that his daughter inherited. "When she was small, she saw a sign that read 'pony rides', and begged us to let her ride one. We let her ride, and she has loved it ever since."



Erie's Rebecca Hart rides Pippin during an exhibition last year. Hart won the United States Equestrian Federation's National Para Equestrian championship over the weekend in Wayne, Ill. Hart will wait for a call later this week to confirm that she has made the US Paralympic Equestrian Team.