



Olympic Equestrians

by Linda Rapp

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At the elite level of sports there are very few out gay male athletes. Some who have come out after retiring have cited fear of a homophobic reaction by others in the sport as a reason for remaining closeted while they competed.

The atmosphere in the sport of equestrianism is different from most, however. "I would say that many gays are involved in the horse world. . . . It is certainly no secret. This is a very accepting community," stated distinguished equestrian Mason Phelps, Jr.

Gay equestrians are among the most successful and respected athletes in their sport, and a number of them have participated in the Olympic Games.

Mason Phelps, Jr.

Mason Phelps, Jr. (b. 1949) has played a wide variety of roles in equestrian sports. He began riding at an early age and was soon competing in eventing and jumping both in the United States and abroad. In 1968 he received the double honors of being named to the Olympic team on the Three Day Eventing squad and chosen as the U.S. Combined Training Association's Rider of the Year.

Four years later he embarked on a career as a trainer. Eventually he opened his own stable for training hunters and jumpers.

In addition, Phelps became an event manager, producing equestrian shows around the country, founding such popular events as the "AA Rated Xmas Show" in San Antonio, Texas and the New England Horsemen's Association Hunt Seat Medal in Springfield, Massachusetts.

Phelps, who retired from competition in the late 1990s, now works in equestrian media. He established the Phelps Media Group in 2001 and launched the equestrian news web site PhelpsSports.com five years later.

Phelps has a long record of philanthropy. His "Denim and Diamonds" fundraising parties, first held in 1997, have benefited the United States Equestrian Team (USET).

In 1996 Phelps joined with fellow Olympic equestrian Robert Dover and Dover's partner, show jumper Robert Ross, to found the Equestrian AIDS Foundation (EAF) to provide financial assistance for medical treatment, housing, food, and other necessities to members of the equestrian community with HIV/AIDS. Melissa Etheridge and Deborah Cox have been among the celebrities to perform at EAF fundraising events.

While offering help to persons with HIV/AIDS remains central to its mission, the EAF has recently extended the range of its work to assisting people who have suffered calamitous injuries. In reflection of this additional function, the organization has changed its name to the Equestrian Aid Foundation.

Robert Dover

Robert Dover (b. 1956) received his own first horse as a Bar Mitzvah present from his parents. An avid rider from an early age, he trained in various equestrian disciplines but was especially drawn to dressage. His mother, Jean Dover, attested to his dedication to his sport, recalling, "When Robert was a teenager, I never had to worry about where he was. He was always at the barn . . . cleaning his tack with my best olive oil."

Dover enrolled at the University of Georgia. While there, he had his first sexual encounter with another man, an experience he described as "a new life begun." He subsequently "began slowly to socialize with the gay community . . . and ultimately joined the close-knit family of gay students there."

Dover has been together with his life partner, fellow equestrian Robert Ross, since 1988. His family approves of the match. "We couldn't have picked a more perfect mate if we had tried," declared Jean Dover. "We love [Ross] like another son."

After his graduation from Georgia, Dover embarked on a highly successful career in dressage, competing both nationally and internationally. A highlight came in 1987, when he bested Dr. Reiner Klimke, the holder of six Olympic gold medals, to win the Aachen (Germany) Grand Prix and give the United States its first victory in the event in 27 years.

Dover became a mainstay of the American Olympic team, participating in individual and team dressage. He first competed at the 1984 Los Angeles games and continued his Olympic career in 1988 in Seoul, where he achieved his best individual finish, in thirteenth place.

Dover's first medal came at the Barcelona games in 1992, when the United States won the team bronze. Dover was also part of the bronze medal-winning dressage teams in 1996 in Atlanta, 2000 in Sydney, and 2004 in Athens.

In 2000 the United States Equestrian Team honored Dover by electing him their captain. He has also been recognized by his peers with the Male Equestrian of the Year award from the United States Olympic Committee in 1994 and with induction into the United States Dressage Foundation Hall of Fame in 2008.

Dover takes pride in having co-founded the Equestrian AIDS Foundation with Ross and Phelps. Not only riders but also grooms, walkers, and farriers have benefited from EAF's support. Dover stated that he has repeatedly been told, "You were my equestrian angels. Without your group I couldn't live."

Dover supported EAF's decision ten years after its founding to change its name to the Equestrian Aid Foundation and expand its mission to help members of the horse community with serious injuries. "We still serve men, women, and children living with AIDS, but by changing our focus to 'aid,' we're embraced by many more donors," stated Dover, who noted that the group's fundraising base had increased tenfold.

Guenter Seidel

A native of Fischen im Allgäu in Bavaria, Guenter Seidel (b. 1960) earned a degree as a horse trainer (Bereiter) in Germany before immigrating to the United States in 1985. He is also a talented dressage rider and was soon enjoying success competing in the sport for his adopted country.

He won the USET Intermediaire Championships in 1992 and earned the individual bronze medal at the United States Olympic Festival in 1994. The following year he was part of American teams that took silver at the Pan American Games and gold at the Can-Am Dressage Challenge.

Seidel's first Olympic appearance and first medal came in 1996 in Atlanta, where the United States team

won the bronze in dressage. Seidel and his teammates repeated as bronze medalists in the Sydney games in 2000 and in Athens in 2004.

It was widely expected that Seidel would be on his fourth Olympic team in 2008, but a tendon injury to his horse Robin before the Dressage Affaire, a qualifying event, put an end to his chances. "It would be the equivalent of Tiger Woods being knocked out of a tournament," stated event spokesman Bob Scheid.

While acknowledging his disappointment, Seidel showed his spirit of sportsmanship, saying, "I've been lucky enough to participate in three Olympics, so I can't complain." Nevertheless, Seidel looks forward to being in a fourth and is training a young horse, U II, whom he hopes to ride in the 2012 games in London.

Within the horse community Seidel is respected not only for his exquisite performances but also for his compassion and willingness to help others. USET dressage teammate Betsy Steiner, who has long been close friends with Seidel—a relationship that she calls "a Will and Grace kind of thing"—praised him for being "extremely generous with his time" and also noted, "I think it's because he's so balanced and content in himself that . . . he can step outside of himself and into other persons' shoes to understand how they feel."

The USET recognized Seidel's role in the sport and beyond by awarding him the 2002 Whitney Stone Cup for "a distinguished record in international competition while also serving as an ambassador for the USET and equestrian sports."

Carl Hester

Carl Hester (b. 1967) grew up on the tiny Channel island of Sark, where there were no cars. Equines provided the transportation, and Hester got his start in the sport by riding on donkeys and ponies. Every summer, island residents gather for a horse show, for which Hester annually returns, to the delight of his grandmother, whom he calls his biggest fan.

Hester quit school at the age of fifteen to work with horses. Jobs being scarce on Sark, he moved to England, taking a job in Hampshire at the Fortune Centre, an institution that allowed adults with physical or learning disabilities to experience the joy and satisfaction of being able to ride. While there, Hester began participating in major competitions, enjoying early success by winning the 1985 Young Dressage Rider Championship.

Hester moved on to spend some three and a half years working for Jannie and Christopher Taylor on their Gloucestershire farm. "[The Taylors] became my alternative family, and life with them was like a second, if eccentric, childhood," stated Hester, who also praised the couple as excellent teachers, saying, "It was during this time that I learnt the true basis of horsemanship, finding a way based on tact, patience, firmness, and kindness when dealing with horses with behavioral problems."

Hester's ongoing success in equestrian competitions drew the attention of Wilfried and Ursula Bechtolsheimer, who offered him a job riding for their stable in Germany. Hester declared himself "overawed" by the quality of their horses and their facilities.

During his three years with the Bechtolsheimers, Hester competed in European and World Championships and also made his first appearance in the Olympic Games. In 1992 he became the youngest rider ever to represent the United Kingdom.

Upon returning to England, Hester became a business partner at the stables of Kate Carter in Stow on the Wold, Gloucestershire and later established his own yard at nearby Hartpury. He quickly developed a reputation as an outstanding trainer with a natural gift for teaching.

Hester competed on the British dressage teams at the 2000 and 2004 Olympics but met with disappointment in 2008, when both of his top horses had injuries during the season and so could not qualify.

Hester rode in the Olympic Games for the fourth time in 2012 in London. His outstanding performance was key to securing the gold medal in team dressage for Great Britain, to the elation of fans witnessing the victory in their home country.

In addition to competing, Hester has been a mentor to his young teammate on the 2012 gold medal-winning dressage team, Charlotte Dujardin, whom he discovered at a "talent-scouting" event. Dujardin expressed her appreciation of Hester's invaluable contribution to her athletic career, telling Pippa Cuckson of the London *Daily Telegraph*, "I owe everything to him, for being here, having wonderful horses and for this gold medal. Carl is very special to me: thank you."

A popular figure in the British horse world, Hester is much admired for the elegance of his riding style and respected as a first-rate trainer. In addition to giving lessons, he has co-authored several books and produced instructional videos to help others learn to excel at the sport he loves.

Blyth Tait and Paul O'Brien

New Zealander Blyth Tait (b. 1961) came by his love of horses naturally: his father bred race horses and encouraged his son's interest in equestrian sports.

Tait initially rode as a show jumper in the 1980s but then expanded his range of skills to become a three day eventer. He first rode for New Zealand in 1988, taking second place at an event in Australia. His continued success in international competition earned him the world number one ranking from 1992 to 1998.

Tait went to his first Olympic Games in 1992, winning individual bronze and team silver in three day eventing. He collected two more medals at the Atlanta games in 1996, a team bronze and an individual gold.

Tait was named captain of the 2000 equestrian team. He was also given the signal honor of being selected to bear New Zealand's flag in the opening ceremony at the Sydney games.

New Zealand was expected to dominate equestrian events in 2000. The country fielded an exceptionally strong team, including Tait's partner of ten years, Paul O'Brien (b. 1968). As things developed, however, the Sydney games turned into a nightmare.

Tait's beloved horse Chesterfield died suddenly while in quarantine before the games began. His other stellar mount, Ready Teddy, with whom he had won the gold medal in Atlanta and who was arguably the best horse that he had ever ridden, came up lame and was forced to withdraw. A series of other misfortunes ensued, and New Zealand came away with no medals in team events and only one individual bronze.

Among the casualties was O'Brien's horse Enzed, who had to be withdrawn for medical reasons after the cross-country portion of the three-day event.

Like Tait, O'Brien has had a lifelong love of horses. As a child he learned to ride ponies on his aunt's farm and began to hone his skills at a pony club.

Although O'Brien's interest in equestrian sport never waned, he studied for a career in a more conventional

field and became a mortgage broker, a job that he did not find satisfying. "I knew that it wasn't for me and decided to check out the horse scene," he stated. "I thought I would give it a go in the U.K. for a while and was fortunate enough to get some good horses to ride there."

It was O'Brien's move to England that brought him together with Tait, who had also gone to Britain and who had a training yard there. Tait was first O'Brien's mentor—"He has trained me from day one, so he has been the main influence on me and my riding career," said O'Brien—and then the relationship grew into a loving one.

Tait and O'Brien left England in 2005 so that Tait could go into a horses sales business with his father.

Although neither Tait nor O'Brien has again ridden for New Zealand in the Olympics, both took part in the Kiwi team's appearance in Beijing in 2008, O'Brien as Olympic selector and Tait as team manager.

Edward Gal

Dressage specialist Edward Gal (b. 1970) of the Netherlands began his pursuit of the sport at the age of fourteen, studying with the riding association De Spreng at Rien van der Schaft but then transferring to the yard of Anky van Grunsven, one of Holland's leading equestrians.

Gal also demonstrated his talent as a trainer, taking fourth place in the PAVO Cup—a championship for young horses—in 1998. He has gone on to achieve considerable success both in training horses and coaching riders.

Gal had particularly good results in competition in 2005-2006, when he won three silver medals—one for his individual performance at the World Cup finals and two as a member of the Dutch team at the European Championship and the World Equestrian Games.

Subsequently, Gal seemed to have found his dream horse in Moorlands Totilas (nicknamed Toto), with whom he set a record score in Grand Prix Freestyle at the Olympia World Cup qualifying competition in 2009 before earning three gold medals at the World Equestrian Games the following year.

Only a few months later, however, Toto's owner, Cees Visser, shocked the equestrian world by selling the horse to breeder Paul Schockemöhle of Germany, the archrival of the Netherlands in dressage.

Gal was disconsolate. At the Global Dressage Forum, reporter Sarah Jenkins observed that "Edward fought back tears" as he told her, "All I know is they picked him up yesterday and that that was really really hard." Gal was so distraught that "he couldn't bring himself to watch the video of his ride [aboard Toto] in the grand prix special" that had earned them a gold medal at the World Equestrian Games, she added.

Gal was able to get a ride on another fine horse, Undercover, as he worked toward making the Dutch Olympic team in 2012. His efforts were rewarded when he and his teammates took a bronze medal in the London games.

Gal had hoped that his Olympic teammates would include his life partner, Hans Peter Minderhoud (b. 1973). Like Gal, he has a reputation as an excellent trainer, and he has won medals in dressage, including a gold for the Dutch team at the European Championships in 2007. Although Minderhoud did not secure a spot on the 2012 Olympic squad, he is considered one of the formidable equestrians in the country.

In a 2008 interview with *Eurodressage* magazine, Gal and Minderhoud stated that working together on a daily basis has yielded professional benefits for both of them. They also opined that the shared experience was good for them as a couple. Minderhoud stated that "competitions are a way of life and it is so much fun if you are with someone who precisely understands that and knows what you are doing, dedicating all your

time to horses." Gal echoed his sentiments and quipped that an additional boon was that "we only need one hotel room now."

Asked how competing against each other affected their relationship, Minderhoud replied, "We both like to win, but you need this trait if you want to get somewhere. In the show ring, we are just competitors but we grant each other the success."

Peter Taylor

Peter Taylor (b. 1953) had a happy childhood on a farm in Northland, New Zealand. His passion for equestrian sport began at the age of eleven, when his father gave him a pony.

Two years later, however, Taylor's parents separated. Taylor remained close to his father, who died in 1995, but is estranged from his mother, whose mood swings and emotionally manipulative behavior caused their relationship to deteriorate.

Taylor took solace in the companionship of animals. "You can form a relationship with horses and dogs because you can trust them," he declared. "They don't carry baggage like people. They don't look you in the eye and lie to you."

As much as he loved riding, Taylor did not envision a career as an equestrian. He earned a degree in Hotel and Catering Management and then, at the age of only twenty-two, co-founded an Auckland restaurant, Le Brie, and became its head chef.

Taylor continued riding for pleasure, but his talent was such that he earned acceptance into New Zealand's National Equestrian Centre and was soon representing his country in international events. His hopes of riding for New Zealand in the 1980 Moscow Olympics were dashed, however, when his horse died from an accident shortly before the games.

Taylor carried on careers in both hospitality and equestrianism. His bar Surrender Dorothy was long a mainstay on Ponsonby Road, Auckland's prime dining destination. For a time he also operated a catering business in Sydney.

On the equestrian side, Taylor worked as a contract rider for twenty-four years and also moved into training and management. He coached a Canadian rider to a gold medal at the 1991 Pan American Games and reached the Olympics as assistant team manager for Canada in Barcelona in 1992.

A tiny insect changed Taylor's life forever. While in Barcelona, he was bitten by a Spanish sandfly and contracted visceral leishmaniasis *donnovanni*, a bone-marrow disease that typically proves fatal within twenty months. For Taylor, diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1985, the prognosis was extremely dire.

The aggressive chemotherapy that doctors used to fight the infection cost Taylor much of his hearing and ninety percent of his vision, but the very fact of his survival led doctors to hope that they had found a regimen to treat leishmaniasis. Unfortunately, no other patient has responded as Taylor did.

"In the end," stated Taylor, "the doctors wrote that 'we recognize that this client has an amazing spirit.' Now, doctors never write things that are ethereal like that, but there was no reason to understand why I should still be alive."

Taylor published an autobiography, *Don't Postpone Joy*, in 2005. The work has also come out in Braille and talking book editions.

Because of his "amazing spirit," Taylor has had success as a public speaker, treating subjects ranging from

living with HIV to development strategies for running a business.

Taylor and his partner, Rodney Coleman, reside in Auckland and operate Dorothy's Sister: A Bar and House of Fabulosity on Ponsonby Road. Coleman tends the bar and manages the front of the house while Taylor reigns in the kitchen, making his specialty cakes and creating an array of Spanish-inspired tapas, an ironic and poignant choice but one that underscores his resilience and determination.

Pearson, Lee

Another outstanding equestrian is Paralympian Lee Pearson (b. 1974).

The Paralympics are elite sport events for athletes from six different disability groups. The Paralympics are held in the same year and in the same venues as the Olympic Games. Although the Paralympics feature disabled athletes, the games emphasize the participants' athletic achievements rather than their disabilities.

Pearson began his life in a closet. Following his birth on February 4, 1974 in Cheddleton, Staffordshire, doctors sedated his mother, Lynda Pearson, for thirty-six hours. When she regained consciousness and demanded to see her child--if she had a living one--she was wheeled to a broom closet where her son was lying in a crib covered by a cloth amid a collection of cleaning equipment.

The baby had arthrogryposis multiplex congenita, a condition that causes the muscles of the limbs to grow as scar tissue. His frail arms and legs were grotesquely twisted. Despite his shocking appearance, reported Pearson, "Mum took a gulp, picked me up, and gave the first of a million cuddles."

Pearson required numerous operations and had had fifteen by 1980, when he was recognized with the United Kingdom's Children of Courage Award.

His parents, Pearson stated, "were determined to make [his] life as normal as they possibly could" and therefore managed to get him moved from a school for students with special needs to a mainstream school when he was nine. They also gave him a donkey named Sally to ride when he went off into the countryside with his friends since he could not pedal a bicycle.

Pearson progressed to riding horses and rejoiced in the freedom of the movement of the animals but did not initially foresee equestrianism as a profession. He wound up working in the back room of a supermarket, but he found the isolation of that environment insufferable. "If I hadn't discovered the possibilities of a full-time career in sport through watching the 1996 Paralympics in Atlanta, I'd have committed suicide," he stated. "I hated the job so much I was on antidepressants."

Pearson developed his skills at dressage and began competing in 1998. He enjoyed spectacular success, making the British team for the 2000 games in Sydney, where he won three gold medals--two individual and one team--with his horse Blue Circle Boy, affectionately known as Gus.

Rider and horse swept the medals again in Athens in 2004. Pearson subsequently retired Gus and trained a new horse, Gentleman, aboard whom he won three more gold medals in Beijing in 2008.

Pearson holds a dozen other gold medals from other para dressage competitions and also has the distinction of being the only disabled rider to take a title at the British Dressage National Championships, with a victory in the 2003 elementary restricted finals.

Because of his expertise and achievement, Pearson was named the 2003 and 2004 BBC Midlands Disabled Sports Person of the Year and was also voted BBC Midlands Sports Personality of the Year in 2004.

For his accomplishments in equestrianism and also for his service to sport for the disabled, he was awarded an M.B.E. in 2001 and an O.B.E. in 2005.

Pearson competed on home turf in the London Paralympic Games in 2012. A member of the gold medal-winning British dressage team, he also earned a silver medal in the individual event.

He won a third medal, a bronze, in freestyle dressage, but there was controversy over the judging. Oliver Brown of the London *Daily Telegraph* called British judge Sarah Rodger's scoring of Pearson's performance "a shockingly anomalous result" and one "wholly at odds with that of fellow judges from Argentina, Belgium and Germany, all of whom put the 10-time Paralympic champion in the silver medal position" whereas Rodger relegated him to tenth place for technical merit and only twelfth for artistic impression.

Upset by the marking, Pearson told Brown, "I'm aware of that judge, and I don't know what the politically correct answer would be" to evaluating her scoring, adding that "it has happened before with her, and probably it will happen again."

It may happen in the 2016 games in Rio de Janeiro, which Pearson has announced plans to attend, although with a new mount, his horse Gentleman having "probably had his day now at Beijing and London."

While pursuing his quest for future gold, Pearson is cheering on others, including his British teammate Natasha Baker, who credits him as the person who inspired her to commit to the hard work of qualifying for the Paralympic team and to realize a goal when she received a gold medal in London.

Pearson is not only an inspiration to disabled athletes but also a proud member of the glbtq community. He came out to his parents on the eve of his twenty-first birthday, for which they "wanted to lay on a major, major . . . party." He had previously pretended to have a romantic interest in women but decided that the time for honesty had come, asking himself, "What's the point in people celebrating my coming of age when they don't know who I really am?"

The revelation, he stated, "was difficult for my mum and dad because they had the normal expectations of marriage and grandchildren so there was a period of adjustment." Pearson was gratified by their eventual response, however. "I'm quite glad that I came out before I moved out and had my independence," he said, "because then you know you've really been accepted."

Pearson owns a yard with six stables in Cheddleton, where he has established a very successful breeding business. The athlete who cannot move without full-leg splints and crutches or the use of a motorized wheelchair also trains able-bodied equestrians in the art and sport of dressage.

Conclusion

With a generally welcoming attitude toward glbtq participants, equestrianism is the exception in sports culture, which is all too often homophobic.

Robert Dover expressed the hope that athletes in other sports will someday feel free to identify themselves publicly as gay—and he knows that there are many who could. "I wish that all gay athletes would come out in all disciplines—football, baseball, the Olympics, whatever," he said. "After six Olympics, I know they're in every sport. You just have to spend one day in the housing, the gyms, or at dinner to realize we're all over."

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