

Riders shine at Special Olympics

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SKOWHEGAN — Catlyn Almodovar rode Annie, the horse, into the ring and trotted through an obstacle course of orange cones.

She gently nudged the horse to step backward a few paces and then successfully maneuvered the 19-year-old Paint through another obstacle course, finally stopping at and dropping a ring on a cone.

The audience clapped as Almodovar, led by volunteer Alison Nolan, 12, of Topsham, rode Annie out of the ring.

“Wonderful job!” a coach, Kathie Tuck, told Almodovar. “She did really good. She handled the horse very well by herself.”

Almodovar was happy with her performance in the Working Trails contest for western riders, acknowledging good-naturedly that she bypassed a little bridge she was to have crossed. “I did great! I forgot the bridge, but that’s OK.”

Almodovar, 12, of Brunswick, was one of 88 riders taking part Saturday in the 12th annual Special Olympics Maine Equestrian Competition. About 300 people turned out for the event, held at Skowhegan State Fairgrounds.

The athletes came from all over the state, where they had trained at a dozen stables participating in the Special Olympics program.

Catlyn, who is autistic, said she loves riding, has been doing it about six years, and trains at Triple J Farm in Bowdoin. This was her fifth time competing at the Olympics. “She listens,” Almodovar said of Annie, who belongs to stable owners Jim and Jan Marconi. “She does what I say. I like trotting and picking up the rings to put on the cone and also I like trotting around the course.”

Almodovar’s father, Carlos, and mother, Tammy, were proud of their daughter, who was diagnosed with autism when she was four. Her father said she used to become agitated very easily, but the horse-riding therapy has done wonders for her.

“It was almost instantaneous — it had a calming effect for her,” Carlos Almodovar said. “Something clicked with the horse to where it soothed her manner. She became more calm.” The riding therapy also helped Catlyn to become more social, he said.

“The moment they put her on the horse, she took right to it,” he said. “She wasn’t afraid. I was very surprised. Ever since that, I knew it was for her.”

The Marconis said they love what they do, taking anywhere from 8 to 12 Special Olympians every year to train.

Jan Marconi said she started with the horse program 12 years ago, at its inception.

“It’s been very much a learning experience,” she said. “You learn a lot about yourself when you work with these folks. I learn a lot about the riders. They’re really such wonderful people and they try so hard and this is so important to them.”

Jan Marconi, her husband, and 10 other people are members of the Special Olympic Maine Equestrian Committee. Preparing for the state event is a lot of work, but it is worth it, she said. Athletes compete in showmanship, working trails, relay, clover leaf barrel races, equitation and other categories.

“I’m fortunate,” Jan Marconi said. “I have lots of volunteers and coaches. The coordination is important here — and communication. It’s an amazing day. You can’t walk out of here without such a warm feeling.”

Maine was one of the first states to begin an equestrian program for Special Olympics and was featured in SPIRIT magazine, an international Special Olympics magazine, for its groundbreaking efforts.

“When we started 12 years ago, we had 35 riders,” said Peter Selwood, chairman of the Special Olympics Maine Equestrian Program. “We have 88 this year. This year is a little bit low because of the economy.”

He said riders are required to have a minimum of 10 training sessions before competing — rules mandated by International Special Olympics.

He said the state contest is meant to be a happy event for athletes and their families, trainers, coaches, judges and spectators.

“Everyone supports everyone,” Selwood said. “There’s no cut-throat. It’s a positive experience for athletes. It’s fun.”

Jan Marconi said Skowhegan State Fair donates use of all its facilities and has been doing so for all 12 years of the competition.

“It’s a big kudo to Skowhegan for doing that because it’s a wonderful venue for this,” she said. “It’s a labor of love for all of us, just to put it all together and have a wonderful day.”

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