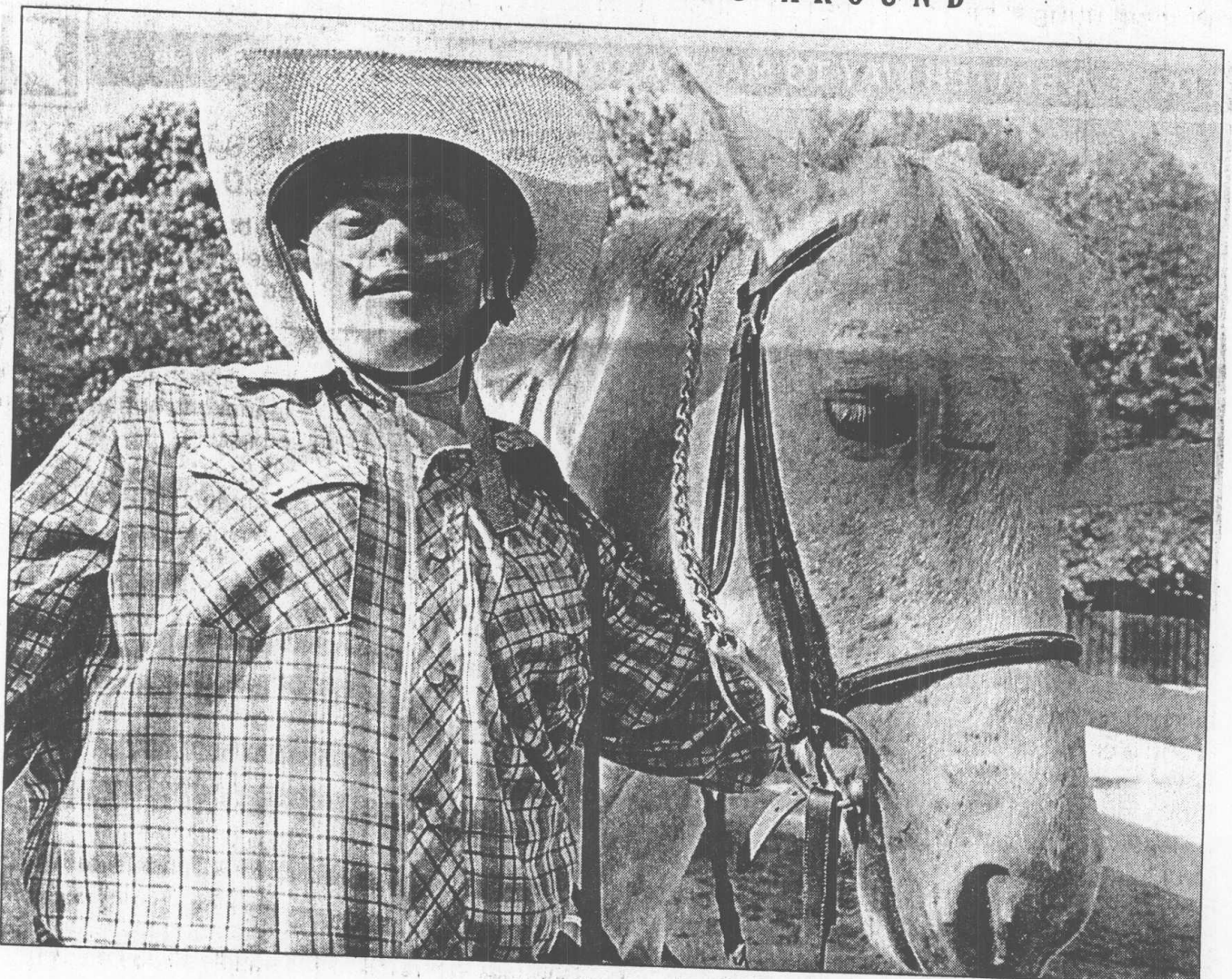


NOT JUST HORSING AROUND



Damian Russo, 21, of Pleasant Plains, keeps a firm grip on his horse.

ADVANCE PHOTOS ■ PAULE SAVIANO

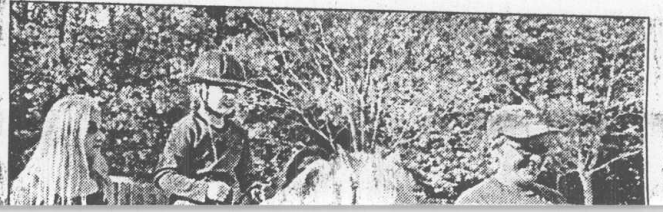
SPECIAL RIDERS MOUNTING UP

Horsemen's show will have a new event

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The title of competition No. 24 is: "Special Olympics"



2 of 4



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The title of competition No. 24 is: "Special Olympics Walk Only." The six competitors in this category are all first-time entrants in the horse show. They are all excited and prepared. And, yes, they are all handicapped.

Since August, these athletes have been practicing at Carousel Riding Academy in Totterville, in a Special Olympics equestrian program co-sponsored and funded by the Police Athletic League.



WARREN HYNES

Suzanne Grande, who owns Carousel, has been instructing 35 handicapped individuals in the program.

"The program is going wonderfully," Ms. Grande said. "It's been really good for their self-esteem, coordination, leg muscles. The whole thing is keeping their eyes up and getting their balance. They're no different than any other kids."

Richard Salinardi, Staten Island area coordinator for the Special Olympics, said the equestrian program has

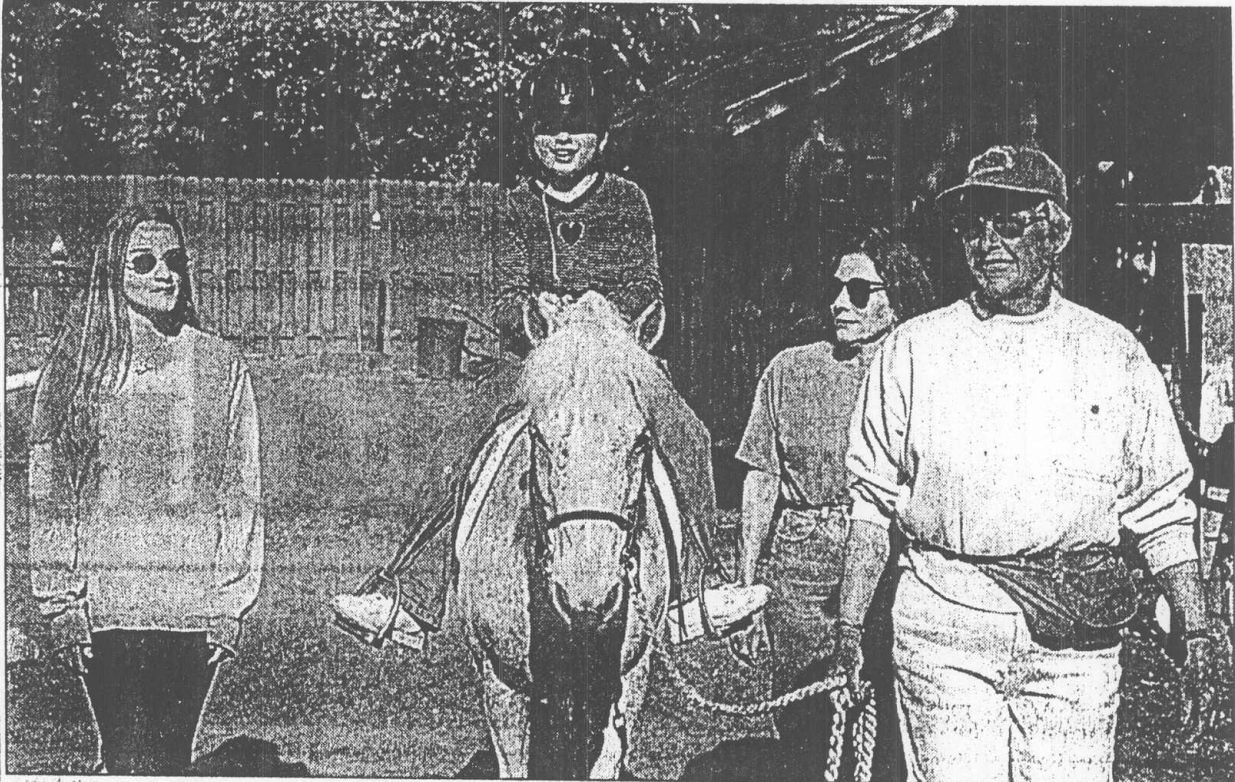


Jessica Mucciariello, 10, of Castleton Corners, is escorted by Lesley Bartoletti of Totterville, left, and Vicky McAvoy of Westerleigh.

added another branch to the Special Olympics tree. "We're taking advantage of the resources that we have on the Island," Salinardi said. "It's been very successful, and the volunteers have gotten involved with it."

The athletes who will compete on Saturday range in disability. There is Damian Russo, a 21-year-old Pleasant Plains resident with Down syndrome, who rides with an oxygen tank strapped to the back of his saddle; Kristina Imhof, a 10-year-old from Huguenot, who also has Down syndrome; Andrea Moore, 8, of Charleston, who is deaf; Jessica Mucciariello, 10, of Castleton Corners, who

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From left, Leslie Bartoletti of Tottenville, Jessica Mucciariello, 10, of Castleton Corners, Lucile Bendik of Rosebank and Vicky McAvoy of Westerleigh soak up the sun during a walk around the ring at Carousel Riding.

Horses

FROM PAGE A21

has cerebral palsy, Keri-Anne Loglisci, 21, of Annadale, who is mentally handicapped; and Jody Imbriale, 33, of Westerleigh, who asked that her handicap not be printed.

And then there is Alan Russo, Damian's brother. Alan, who is 11, also has Down syndrome, as well as fetal alcohol syndrome. But Alan has done so well in riding that he's competing in other categories on Saturday, against kids who aren't disabled. The riding has helped Alan gain a great deal of concentration and release his energy in a positive way, his mother said.

"He loves it," said Alan's mom, Teri. "His whole room is horses. It's just a natural thing — you put him on a pony one day, and that was it."



Alan Russo, 11, of Pleasant Plains looks a little doubtful high atop this horse. No matter, he's got control of the reins and the horse doesn't seem to mind.

His brother overheard this. "Me, can't explain it — it relaxes me. Even brushing the horse does." Alan added.



Salinardi said Alan's athletic ability is quite incredible. "The kid is a natural," Salinardi said. "He's good at golf, swimming, softball — and he's really taken to horses. And he's a competitor. He doesn't have that fear. He can represent anybody."

Andrea Moore also has loved horses for some time. She has watched horses in the stables near her home, and she has helped Ms. Grande around the stables a bit, even with shoveling manure. Andrea comes to Carousel three or four days a week.

"I like to ride the horse by myself," Andrea said. "I like to go up and down, and then I go fast. I wash the horse, clean the horse with the water, and give him the carrots."

Damian Russo is the only person in the program who is riding Western at this time (the others are riding English style). The larger Western saddle provides enough room for Damian's oxygen tank behind him. He has had four open-heart surgeries, and he is living on one lung. He requires the oxygen tank 24 hours a day. When riding Western, Damian must wear the proper attire — checkered shirt, blue jeans, boots and cowboy hat.

"This is something he wants to do, and we're tired of telling him he can't do anything," Ms. Russo said. "Something like this keeps him up and keeps him going instead of him getting depressed."

Damian talks with much enthusiasm about riding. "I like the horse jumps, and the trot," he said. "Riding a horse is a privilege."

Of course, Damian has other agendas as well. "I like the girls," he said.

Kristina Imhof seems to be enjoying her riding sessions as well. "I feel that she's getting to learn to take instructions a little better, to get social activities, and also to learn how to compete," said her father, Andrew.

Keri-Anne Loglisci undergoes a transformation when she's on a horse. Normally, she is talking constantly. But on the horse, she understands that she can't ride unless she concentrates. She becomes quiet as she focuses and holds the reins.

"She's got a lot of fears, but this is very, very good for her," said Keri-Anne's mother, Judy. "I think it's good for any type of disability. The animals and the kids just seem to have some kind of a connection. I think animal therapy is just a wonderful thing."

The benefits of animal therapy are quite evident when Jessica Mucciariello gets on board Apache, her favorite horse. Jessica begins smiling from the moment she sits down on Apache.

"It's fun — all of it," said Jessica, who uses a walker when she's walking on her own.

Jessica's mother, Irene, said she was surprised at first that this was a sport in which Jessica could participate. Horse riding has been beneficial to Jessica's sense of balance, not to mention her self-esteem.

"It's good for the kids, because they're able to do what everybody else can do," Ms. Mucciariello said.

Jody Imbriale said horse-riding has been a calming influence on her life. "It relaxes me, calms me down, puts me in another world," Ms. Imbriale said. "I've always liked horses since I was a kid. I

Saturday's competitors aren't the only handicapped individuals who are coming to Carousel to ride on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays in this equestrian program. Take Brian Healy, for instance. Brian, who is 27, is mentally handicapped. The New Dorp resident has been riding since August. He, like Keri-Anne, knows he must concentrate and stay calm on the horse.

Usually, Brian doesn't like to wear hats. But when he's riding, he must wear a helmet, and he accepts this. In his sleep, Brian says the word "horse." In school, he tells his friends about his riding lessons.

"If it wasn't for this program, he never would have experienced this," said his mother, Frances.

Brian wasn't riding on a recent day, but he was having fun just being around his friends at Carousel. He and his mother walked over to a white horse named Jiminy Cricket. Brian gently pet the horse's head, between the eyes. Jiminy Cricket stood calmly and accepted Brian's greeting. Brian smiled.

Brian seemed so relaxed and happy as he did this. With a stroke of his hand, he was making this entire program worthwhile.

The Special Olympics equestrian program is seeking volunteers to help with its summer session, which runs from July to September. It is also looking for horse and riding equipment. To volunteer or to ask about the program, call Suzanne Grande at 948-4450 or Teri Russo at 317-5516.