

There is more than medals that counts when going to a RDA Competition

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Akai , who was born premature, is now a 12 year old boy suffering from cerebral palsy. Unlike many others he is able to walk, but has to make big turning movements with his upper body to balance and he falls down quite often. When it comes to his physical condition, he is by far not the most serious case riding in our centre, but teaching him turned out to be a real challenge, because he refused to cooperate with his coach and often started to cry out of a sudden. His father, a military officer, couldn't accept having a disabled child, which probably was the main reason why Akai was not able to come to terms with his fate and set goals for himself. After the parents seperated, his emotions were getting even more out of control; therefore the doctor prescribed him some medication.



At the trial test

We took him to a competition to watch another rider with a similar condition competing against able bodied riders, where this rider even won a medal. That encouraged him, but he still could not find the way out of the hole he had been digging for himself.



Group photo after the trial test, Akai (4th from right) already in good spirits

When we started to plan to take a group of riders to the 10th RDA Yokohama Championships, his mother expressed the wish to let him join this group. We started to prepare him for the competition, but even he was excited about the prospect to go out of the country for the first time, he still could not focus on this goal. When practicing, he was pretty much preoccupied with all the problems he had with himself and the world, which in his eyes was so unfair to him.

Things started to change when we prepared an official letter to his school

to ask for leave of absence for a riding competition abroad. When the whole class knew what he was going to do, his self-confidence got a big boost. The Sunday before we left for Japan, we organized a trial competition with all riders of the group joining in the different tests and the order they would start in Yokohama. We did this not so much as a practice for the riders, but to let the parents know how they would have to support the coaches.

Nevertheless, that day Akai finally got the feeling that he really was going to start in a competition. From that day on there was no complaining any more, at least not in front of the coaches, and one could really talk to him about the competition and what he could do to get a nice result.

I was a bit concerned about the choice of horse RDA Yokohama had made for him, because the horse was much higher and had a much bigger stride than the horses he used to ride. I asked him to give it a try, and if he really had problems with the horse we could try to change it, which he agreed to.



In the fitness room

At our first night in Japan we were staying in a hotel which had a fitness

room for the guests. There we used the chance, to call the whole group together and teach them some exercises they also can do at home to relax and stretch their body. We stressed that as competitors they had a responsibility to take good care of their bodies. Akai obviously took that to his heart, because the day before the competition when all the others went out for some sightseeing and shopping, he decided to stay at the hotel and rest so that he would be in good shape the next morning.



At the hotel: ready to leave, Akai tries very hard to sit straight (second from left)

How proud was he when he appeared in his competition gear and how beautiful was the whole group sitting there in their white breeches and black jackets. The parents were equally impressed and moved seeing their children in their competition outfit. The first test Akai started was the Gymkhana trot test, a pole race like it is done at the Special Olympics. It was a bit difficult for Akai to cope with the horses' big strides while doing the turns, so he did only trot on the straight lines. Knowing that he could not get close to

the medal ranks, he still was proud of being able to finish the race without faults and doing some trotting on this big horse. We assured him that we were very satisfied with his performance and expected him to shine in the afternoon, when he was going to join a drill competition. And surely he did. I never saw him sitting that straight and confident on a horse; fully occupied with doing the movements he was asked for. It was such a pretty picture seeing this boy, who previously had complained that sitting astride was too tiring for him, on this beautiful black horse. We knew that he did a good job, but when the results showed that he was on 1st place, it was our turn to be moved.



Akai fully concentrated on his turning.

This trip did not only give Akai a gold medal, self-confidence and goals to strive for, but also a new friend, who like him is a CP-patient, but unlike him has to use a wheelchair and is far more optimistic. Hope this experience and his new friend will help Akai to realize that even with a disability life can be worthwhile.



Back home proudly showing the medals.

Living on an island means that going abroad always involves going on an airplane, which makes participating in competitions a quite costly trip for us and our riders. Even so it is really worth the time and money spent, because the experience of going abroad as a group is so much different from joining a competition at home and Akai is only one example of what changes it can bring to a kid's life. A thousand thanks to RDA Yokohama for making it possible for us to join with such a big group (7 riders)!



Group photo with coaches and volunteers from RDA Yokohama