

# Equestrians ride high in Special Olym

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because they really support each other and cheer each other on," said DeeDee O'Brien, executive director of Challenge Unlimited, of Landers' group at yesterday's 20th annual Special Olympics equestrian tour-



Jennifer Landers, 33, of Chelmsford proudly shows off her silver and gold medals.

SUN/ANGEL ROY

namment at Ironstone Farm.

Challenge Unlimited provides therapy for people with disabilities by using therapeutic tools and methods involving horses and the farm environment. The program serves 450 children and adults a week.

"When a person is straddled across a walking horse, the movement is the same as a person walking," O'Brien said. "It's a three-dimensional movement that cannot be created any other way. A person born without physically being able to walk would be able to experience that feeling."

O'Brien also noted that horses provide people with emotional and cognitive benefits by doing such tasks as getting the horses ready and doing things in sequence, using different brushes and different motions.

"It makes them proud and confident," O'Brien said. "They get a chance to care for someone else. People with disabilities are usually the ones being cared for."

"It's a challenge for them to do the best they can and come away feeling like they accomplished something," said Marge Griesmer of Reading, a volunteer at the event. "It builds their confidence."

The 80 riders at yesterday's competition, all clad in riding attire — high black boots, beige riding pants and blazer — displayed their skills on the dirt floor of the



William Lionetta, 10, left, of Andover, and Emily Holway, 8, of Westford receive their ribbons after competing yesterday.

SUN/TORY GERMAN

large, white, wooden ring. Athletes were put in divisions according to ability level, each rider paired with a horse with an appropriate temperament for their ability and size.

They competed in such events and walk, walk/trot and walk/trot/canter. Athletes who could not ride independently were led by handlers.

"One important thing about judging the Special Olympics is that we judge function, not form," said Barbara DeNitto, executive director of the Special Olympics equestrian program. "If they are physically unable to get

their heels down, points are not deducted. Riders wear different-colored armbands to represent disabilities that would affect parts of their performance so that judges know to make allowances.

"Every rider has the opportunity to place. It depends on what kind of day they are having, which is true of all of us," DeNitto added with a laugh.

"This event gives athletes a chance to showcase the skills they have been working on all year and to compete with their peers," O'Brien said. "I know it's important to (the riders), but it's even more



David McInerney, 13, of Westford competes in the event.

important for their families." "She walks for everyone. ... It's very moving," said DeNitto's sister, Linda Gain of Glen, N.H., who volunteered. "She loves it that she is g