

Area Special Olympic Winners

“FUN!” was Justin Fairbanks, 20, response to winning a gold medal in Minnesota Special Olympics on July 20 in North Branch. Justin and Alicia Paine, 31, who also won a gold medal, both were relieved to have their competitive rides over with and having successfully completed their first attempt. Both riders were representing the Mounted Eagles Therapeutic Riding Program, based at Spirit Horse Center, Inc. in Brainerd, Mn. Equestrians competing in the Special Olympics must have cognitive and physical challenges and demonstrate that they can direct and manage their horse.

Their journey to Olympic gold began many months earlier when Lynn Fairbanks, Justin’s mother, requested that the Mounted Eagles program send riders to the event. After approval by the Mounted Eagles Board of Directors, a volunteer coordinator, volunteer coaches and sponsors had to be found. Lynn Fairbanks served as the riders Coordinator, Susie Bailiff, Senior Instructor, volunteered to serve as Alicia’s coach and Becky Clarkin agreed to help Justin. Both coaches and riders put in extra time in the saddle to prepare them for their competition. Alicia additionally spent 10 minutes a day squeezing a small ball to strengthen her fingers. “Pulling on the reins is the hardest part of riding,” she said. Sponsors for the riders were Spirit Horse Center and Grattan Healthcare, Inc.

Both riders entered the English Obstacle Class in which the rider must steer their mount in a designated pattern around barrels, through a gate, in a circle and over poles. Alicia rode the course on her own without the assistance of a volunteer walking at her side. She won the gold medal in this event. Justin also rode in this class and decided to have a side walker with him. He won a silver medal. Their next ride was English Equitation in which the rider must walk, trot, halt and back their horse. Justin won a gold medal and Alicia won the silver in this class.

Riders and coaches were all smiles after their rides. Their victories were not only winning medals, but the thrill of training, riding strange horses, driving to North Branch and performing their routines flawlessly. It was a day they truly felt like the Olympians they were.

Photos by Jan Moran