

Debbie McDonald Impresses with Sportsmanship Talk

A New Jersey 4-H club learns the value of being a good sport.

Debbie McDonald is one of the most decorated American riders in recent years. Along with her beloved mare Brentina, she picked up medals on three consecutive teams (2002 WEG, 2004 Olympics and 2006 WEG) and has become a household name in the dressage world. Still down-to-earth, McDonald spoke about the value of sportsmanship to members of the Hoofbeats 4-H Club on June 13 in Gladstone, N.J. The presentation was part of the United States Olympic Committee's (USOC) 2007 Olympic Education Program called Real Athletes Are Good Sports.

Young 4-H members from all walks of life crowded into the library at the USET Foundation Headquarters and McDonald didn't disappoint them. She talked about the importance of attitude, and how it is very easy to be a good sport when you win or when things are going your way, but the real test of sportsmanship, she emphasized, is when things go wrong.

She relayed the personal experience that unfolded on the world stage at the 2006 World Equestrian Games when Brentina, last in the ring for the American team felt slightly unlevel in her test. McDonald was riding for the team bronze medal, proceeded conservatively, achieved the score necessary for the medal and then withdrew the horse from the individual competition, where she'd been favored to score a medal.

"There is so much pressure in those situations," McDonald said. "But the horse's welfare must come first."

This fact was something impressed deeply on 11-year-old Nicole Broomhead from Basking Ridge, N.J. "I like what she said about always thinking of your horse," Broomhead said. "And to always try your best. That's really important."

McDonald also emphasized her desire to allow horses to be themselves. When Kailey Rocker, also 11, asked her if she ever went on trail rides, McDonald assured her that horses must have the chance to be horses.

"She was really good," Rocker said. "I felt like I could relate to her, she talked about going on trail rides and she seems very normal. Not an intimidating famous rider."