

How It Works: Olympic & Paralympic Games Team Selection

by Leslie Potter



Selecting athletes to represent the U.S. at international competitions is no small task. Putting together teams for the Olympic and Paralympic Games that will give the U.S. its best shot at bringing home medals encompasses multiple factors.

A fair and transparent selection process is paramount to USEF. "Selection procedures are developed with the discipline director for the sport and the relevant sport committee with emphasis on athlete input," said Hallye Griffin, US Equestrian's Director of FEI Sport. "The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) reviews and approves selection procedures for the Olympics, Paralympics, and Pan American Games."

The full selection procedures for the Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games are available on each discipline's page on USEF.org. While all four sports select their teams differently based on the unique attributes, competition schedules, and preparation needed

for each discipline, they all follow the general steps outlined here.

STEP ONE Minimum Eligibility Requirements

The FEI sets parameters for horse-and-athlete combinations to compete as an individual or as part of a team at each level in all disciplines. This may include age ranges for horses or athletes and citizenship requirements and will always include minimum eligibility requirements (MERs). These MERs are typically a set number of qualifying scores at a designated level during a specified time period.

For the 2024 Olympics, the MER qualifying period is January 1, 2023, through June 24, 2024. The Paralympic MER qualifying period

The U.S. Dressage Team for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games earned the United States' first Olympic team silver medal in dressage since 1948.

is January 1, 2022, to June 19, 2024. The full description of MERs and list of qualifying competitions for each discipline are available on the FEI's Paris 2024 Hub at inside.fei.org/fei/paris2024. The comprehensive details of qualification are too long to list here, but the basic MERs for the Olympic and Paralympic Games are:

- Dressage rider/horse combinations must earn a minimum of 67% in Grand Prix tests at two different CDI competitions at the 3* level or above with a certain level of FEI Judges officiating.
- Eventing rider/horse combinations can earn their MERs with one qualifying result at either one CCI5*-L or both a CCI4*-L and a CCI4*-S along with a separate "confirmation result" of a qualifying result at a 4* or 5* after January 1, 2024. Among other things, qualifying results require no cross-country jumping penalties (with an allowance for an 11-point penalty for activating a frangible device).
- Jumping rider/horse combinations must complete a round of specified CSI competitions at either the height of 1.55 meters with four or fewer penalties or at 1.60 meters with eight or fewer penalties.
- Paralympic rider/horse combinations must earn at least one score of 64% or above at a CPEDI3* Grand Prix Test A or Test B (formerly titled the Team and Individual Tests prior to 2023.)

The FEI sets these MERs, but beyond that, it is up to each National Federation to choose how to select qualified athletes for their teams.

"The selection process begins with an application," said Griffin. "It's open to anyone who meets the minimum requirements. From there, most disciplines select a smaller group from within those applicants, who will be asked to do additional things such as observation events, training camps, etc. The team members will ultimately be selected from that group."

STEP TWO Nominated Entry

Nominated Entry refers to the roster of potential team members, traveling reserve, and/or alternate athletes and horses submitted to the FEI up to the maximum number of athletes and horses permitted by the FEI. For the Olympics and Paralympics, the nominated entry for each sport has 12 athletes and 12 horses.

"The Nominated Entry also serves as your substitution pool," said Griffin. "Once you name your final team, if you need to change out any combinations, you may only use combinations that were on the Nominated Entry."

Selectors will consider a variety of factors when naming the nominated entry which are enumerated in the selection procedures. "After every Olympics, we evaluate selection processes to determine if they built the best team," said Griffin. "While performance, scores, and placings are reviewed as part of team selection, we've found that using a straight ranking list is not necessarily going to result in the best team, and that there is a need to have some flexibility in selection."

This flexibility may involve a combination of athletes chosen from a ranking list and athletes chosen through discretionary selection by the selectors and chef d'equipe, based on criteria in the selection procedures.

STEP THREE Observation Events and Mandatory Outings

Athletes in consideration for a team are often required to compete in a certain number of observation events. These events are an opportunity for a team leader, chef d'equipe, and/or selectors to observe prospective team members as one of multiple factors that will inform their decision.

Some team events will require all horse-and-athlete combinations to participate in a single mandatory outing, usually held close to the deadline for final entries. This serves as a final



The Olympic/Paralympic sports of dressage, para dressage, eventing, and jumping select their teams differently based on the unique attributes, competition schedules, and preparation needed for each discipline.

review of the team selection to ensure that all the horses and athletes are fit and ready to compete at the championship level.

STEP FOUR Definite Entry and Final Entry

Definite Entry is an FEI designation for the final selection of participating team members, plus an optional alternate. Definite Entries must be approved by the USEF Board of Directors or Executive Committee or an Ad Hoc of the Board of Directors before being sent to the FEI and announced publicly.

Final Entry is a term used for the Olympics, Paralympics, and Pan American Games and refers to the selection of team members and traveling reserve submitted to the USOPC. For the Paris 2024 Olympics, Final Entry deadlines are between June 7 and July 7, 2024, and the USOPC will approve and submit the full Official Final Entry for all U.S. sports to the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games.

Selecting the Selectors

For most events, the selection procedures include designating official selectors or advisors with in-depth knowledge of the specific discipline. "The sport committees will help identify potential selectors, and then with the discipline director, they submit them as a recommendation to the CEO for approval," said Griffin. "We have very clear contracts outlining the selectors' roles and responsibilities, but essentially their role is to follow the selection procedures that have been published, and to build teams that have the best possible chance at success, and to do it in a fair and transparent way."