



Here is
the Challenge!

FEI Solidarity is supporting a project for multiple sclerosis sufferers in Sardinia that combines riding therapy, competition training and research.

All photos © FEI/Carlo Livi. From left to right: Elena, Daniele, Giovanna, Alberto

Alberto, 36, grins and raises a determined clenched fist when he is asked how he feels about competing in equestrian sport. He obviously enjoys a challenge, which is not surprising for a man who played football from an early age and refereed matches until two years ago. That was when the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) he was diagnosed with at the age of 33, took its grip and he began to tire very quickly.

Severe fatigue is one of the symptoms of MS, which affects one in 708 people in Sardinia – 0.141 per cent of a population of 1,675,411.

Alberto is one of six riders selected from five therapeutic equestrian centres in Sardinia to take part in a pilot project called *Here is the challenge!* The project, supported by FEI Solidarity, combines scientific research with riding therapy and competitive training. It aims to demonstrate that MS sufferers can not only improve benefit physically from riding therapy but can also obtain good results in competition.

Here is the challenge! officially began in November 2012, after the riders underwent medical check-ups and a training programme was drawn up.

"Riding gives me self-esteem, which is helping me to overcome some critical moments in my life," says Alberto. "I like the mutual trust between me and the horses."

WHAT IS MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS?

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is a chronic disease of the central nervous system, which damages the myelin sheaths surrounding nerves in the brain and spinal cord. This impairs how well nerves conduct impulses, affecting a person's motor, sensory and even cognitive functions. The causes of MS are unknown, but genetic and environmental factors are suspected of having some role. The impact of MS on a person's ability to participate in everyday activities varies greatly.



After a six-month riding therapy programme, Alberto and his fellow project participants will be trained to compete. The organisers of the project hope they will be able to take part in a Level 1 international Para-Dressage competition, which will be organised in Sardinia in June 2014 when the project ends.

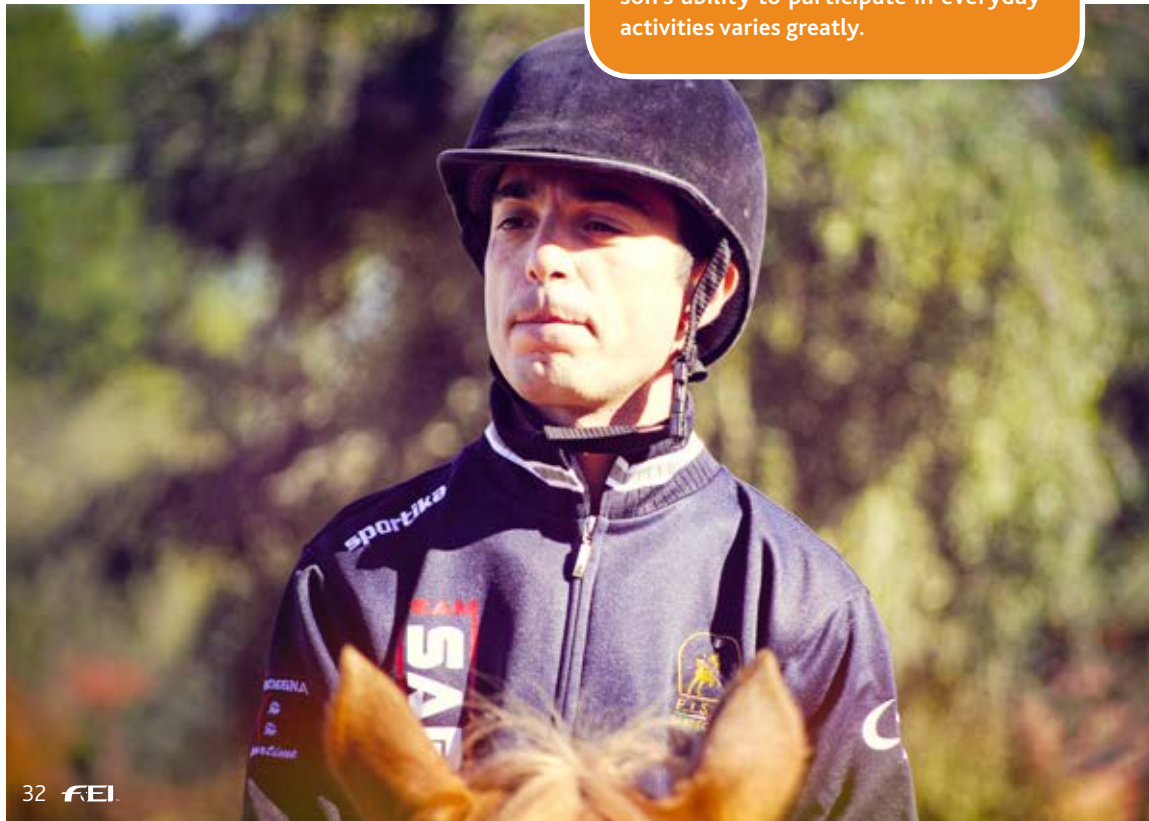
Alberto is enthusiastic about the training. "People who do sport want to win so having the sport gives me an aim," he explains. "This type of project helps you to achieve the aim you've set yourself and in doing so, you feel you are fighting the disease."

Here is the challenge! is the brainchild of psychiatrist Stefania Cerino, who has studied and researched therapeutic riding since 1977 and is the editor of the Italian Equestrian Federation's handbook on the subject.

In 2011, Stefania and Maria Grazia Sechi, president of the Sardinian Regional Committee of the Italian Equestrian Federation, brought together 120 neurologists, psychologists, sports medicine specialists and other scientists from universities in Sardinia to talk about the possibilities of riding therapy for MS sufferers. The idea of setting up a research project was born.

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Alberto



Nine researchers are involved, in addition to Barbara Ardu, technical coordinator of the FISE therapeutic riding department, who is also an FEI Dressage judge.

FEI Para-Equestrian Dressage judge Katherine Ferguson Lucheschi, three trainers and a veterinarian will join them at workshops organised every six months throughout *Here is the challenge!*. These workshops, the first of which took place in November 2012, combine the medical and scientific aspects of the project with the technicalities of Para-equestrian Dressage, including FEI rules and competition judging.

The riders' cardiovascular control and physical capacities such as posture and balance (which can be severely affected by MS), will be monitored. A biomechanical experiment is being conducted, whereby the pressure between the riders and horses is measured at regular intervals.

"The data will give a picture of what is happening and we will be able to see which muscles can be improved," explains Stefania. "We can provide better training because we will know exactly what is happening to each muscle."

The horses ridden throughout the project will be regularly examined by the project's veterinarian and will undergo stress measurements and behavioural evaluations.

"The promotion of the project means that other people will see me and think 'If she can do it, so can I'"

Elena



Scientific data gathered during *Here is the challenge!* will be analysed and presented at a congress. It is hoped that the programme implemented during the project will be offered to other MS sufferers in the future.

Here is the challenge!, which is budgeted at 80,000 euros, has been presented to potential sponsors but, to date, FEI Solidarity is the only organisation that has given any financial assistance. Stefania is optimistic. "The first donor is always the most difficult to find," she says. "FEI Solidarity's backing will help us to secure further support."

Elena is a vivacious 36-year-old who was selected for the project. She developed MS symptoms at the age of 22 and eventually had to give up her job. A long period of depression followed, during which she had no desire to do anything. She had ridden sporadically as a child because "everybody in Sardinia rides" and was recommended for riding therapy two years ago.

The disease has now confined her to a wheelchair, which makes *Here is the challenge!* all the more meaningful to her. "I will be a pioneer," she says. "I will be useful and it is important for me to help other people. The promotion of the project means that other people will see me and think 'If she can do it, so can I'".

Elena's eyes sparkle when she talks about the project. "When I ride, I am able-bodied again," she says. "I use the horse like my legs, close my eyes and feel free."





“This is an opportunity for me to enjoy the satisfaction of showing I am capable of something.” Giovanna

Horses have helped Daniele, 22, to “go back into the outside world”. He developed MS 13 years ago and, like Elena, went through a period of depression. He was “a little scared” when he started riding therapy two years ago but has gained confidence and is now determined to try to compete at the end of *Here is the challenge!*

Forty-six-year-old Giovanna was diagnosed with MS when she was 22 and has had riding therapy since 2007. She finds the prospect of competing daunting but says it has given her an aim. “People who have a disease are set apart, excluded,” she says. “This is an opportunity for me to enjoy the satisfaction of showing I am capable of something. It is really important to me that the project is carried through.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT Here is the challenge!, please contact: riabilitazione@fise.it or info@fisesardegna.com

WOULD YOU TAKE THE RISK?

On 1 January 2013 the new FEI Helmet Rule comes into effect. The welfare of athletes is paramount to the FEI and we urge all involved in equestrian sport to promote helmet safety and familiarise themselves with the general and sport specific rules.



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