

Rohnert Park rider, horse have eyes on Olympics

By **TIM TESCONI**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Robyn Fisher had her eye on 2008. But when she and her horse Sparky won the World Cup qualifier in eventing last month in San Diego, they captured the attention of a former member of the royal British family and the 2004 Summer Olympic Games are now clearly in focus.

Horseman Mark Phillips, the former husband of Britain's Princess Anne, is one of the coaches and selectors for the U.S. equestrian team.

Phillips encouraged Fisher to compete for a place on the U.S. eventing team, one of the

equestrian events to be held at the games in Athens. Now Fisher, 24, of Rohnert Park, and her prized horse, a strapping dark brown gelding, are on the fast track as they battle 80 other equestrians for a chance to go for the gold in Greece.

"Robyn is a very a talented rider with a very talented horse. They've done very well but will have to go through further qualifying events to make the short list," said Phillips, who divides his time between the United States and his native England.

Since she was a child, it's been Fisher's dream to be on the U.S. equestrian team, a consuming passion that has her on a horse seven days a week, 365

days a year. A Sonoma County native and graduate of Ursuline High School and UC Davis, she had planned to focus her energies on the 2008 Olympics, figuring 9-year-old Sparky still has another six years as a top competitor.

But with Phillips' encouragement, Fisher is embarking on a frenzied odyssey that will take her and her horse to France next month, a move that could bring the pair a step closer to this summer's Olympics.

"I'm taking it one event at a time," she said in typical jock-speak, but added, "... I think Sparky is definitely a horse that could take us to the Olym-

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OLYMPICS: Horse bucked rider for starters

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pics. He's an all-around good guy."

Not to mention very valuable. Fisher said word on the horse show circuit is that Sparky's remarkable performance has elevated his value to \$250,000. Not that it really matters. He's not for sale.

"I wouldn't sell him for double that amount," said Fisher, who has been riding horses since she was 5. Never has she enjoyed such a strong bond with a horse, she said.

In the arena they move as one, each seeming to know what the other is thinking. Horse and rider trust each other with their lives as they bound over walls, tree stumps and fences. It's a relationship built over the past six years. But it didn't start out that way.

The first time Fisher rode Sparky he bucked her off, but she bought him anyway, intuitively sensing something special in the magnificent horse with the bad attitude. In the ensuing years, horse and rider developed a chemistry that Fisher describes as "magical."

Fisher and her horse specialize in "eventing," a rigorous competition held over three days that challenges horse and rider in three disciplines — dressage, cross country and

show jumping. Eventing is a test of stamina, speed, skill and courage, highlighted by daring jumps over fences and leaps down seven-foot embankments.

"A good eventing horse is the ultimate sport horse," Fisher said.

Sparky, whose formal name is Le Samurai, is a Holsteiner-Thoroughbred cross bred by Wendy Webster, owner of W-2 Holsteiners in Penn Grove.

"He was a homely baby who turned into a superstar," Webster said with maternal pride.

Saturday, Fisher and Sparky leave for France where they will compete in qualifying competition for the Olympic eventing team. If they place in the top five at the competition in Saumur, France, she and Sparky will go on to the Olympic Selecting Trials in New Jersey in July.

Phillips will select the five-member eventing team following the trials in New Jersey, with horses and riders immediately leaving for England, where they will train at Phillips' stables until going to Greece for the Olympic equestrian events Aug. 14 to 18.

Phillips, a former British Army captain, is a world-renowned equestrian who served as a captain of the British team that won a silver medal at the 1988 Olympics.

Now, as a coach of the U.S. equestrian team, he is specifically responsible for selecting and training the eventing team. Phillips and Fisher talk at least once a week as she moves through the qualifying process and, she hopes, onto Phillips' short list. He wants a winning Olympic team, making the competition fierce.

"Mark Phillips is the Michael Jordan of eventing," Fisher said.

She says superstition prevents her from being overly confident about her chances to make the U.S. team. There are about 80 equestrians from around the United States competing for the eventing team, Phillips said. But only six will be picked — five members and an alternate.

Fisher is the only rider from Northern California in the running.

"Since the day six years ago when Sparky bucked me off, I knew that this horse was going to do something for me."

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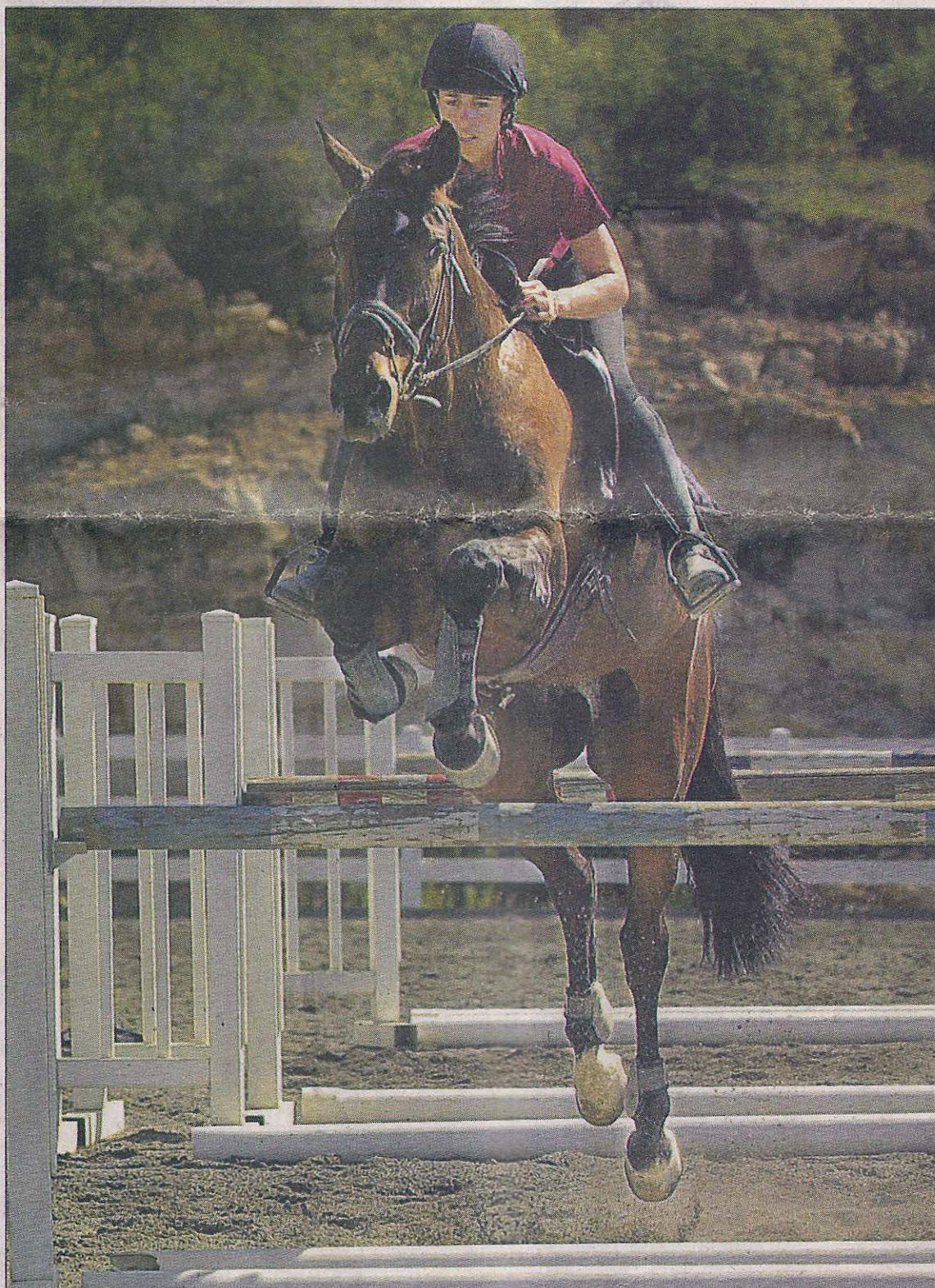
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"I think Sparky is definitely a horse that could take us to the Olympics. He's an all-around good guy."

ROBYN FISHER, rider



Photos by KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat

Robyn Fisher and her horse LeSamurai, or "Sparky," practice jumping Thursday at a stable in Napa County. Fisher and Sparky leave for France in May to compete in an Olympic qualifying event.