



MustPhoto 12

# WE'VE GOT SPIRIT!

The USEF joins a nationwide movement to celebrate the achievements of high school equestrians.

By Cynthia Grisolia

Here are today's top stories from the "High School" home page of sportsillustrated.com: An unknown Portland high school football player has burst onto the recruiting scene; The 'Xcellent 25' boys baseball rankings are revealed; A top female hoops player is injured during a Region 1 final. Now try entering "equestrian" in the search field. Sorry, no items were returned related to your search....

What? You were surprised?

Equestrians are rarely headline news at any level—and that includes high school. That's why the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) and a number of national and state organizations are working to make sure that high school equestrians, like any other jock, get the props they deserve.

Last fall, the USEF launched the High School Equestrian Athlete Program, a national varsity lettering program that will give ninth through 12th grade riders a chance to earn a "varsity letter" for their equestrian endeavors, whether it's riding, driving or vaulting (the handsome symbols of achievement are designed to be worn on any jacket). "What initiated the program," said Jennifer Mellenkamp, Director of National Breed/Discipline Affiliates and Youth Programs at the USEF, "was simply supply and demand. We were receiving phone calls from parents saying, 'Is there anything offered that would recognize high school equestrian athletes? They spend just as much time training or competing as football and basketball players,'" recalled Mellenkamp.

The program quickly found its stride, and response has been overwhelming. "Right now we have over 1,000 students enrolled. And that's within just a few months," said Mellenkamp, who adds that the USEF has received numerous requests to expand the program to allow students to earn a letter for prior years of high school, instead of only the current school year. They are now opening the program to allow any current high school student to earn a varsity letter retroactively. Retroactive applications are due June 1, 2010. She expects that alteration to increase registration dramatically. "Parents have told us the school systems don't

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understand the training and dedication that is involved to be an equestrian athlete," added Mellenkamp, "and there's no recognition for these athletes within their school systems. We felt we needed to start something to give equestrian athletes the acknowledgement they deserve."

The requirements for the Equestrian Athlete Program are uncomplicated: Riders can train at any stable or even be "independent" but they must belong to the USEF, complete at least 100 hours of training in a term year, and compete in either two USEF shows or at least five that are affiliated with or sanctioned by a horse show association, including 4-H. What makes these students different from, say, the school's gridiron hero is, well, the school part.

In general, high school athletic programs do not consider riding a sport, and administrators have put up hurdles—okay, more like triple-bar combinations with a one stride—to programs involving horses. The two main concerns for school administrators are liability and expense.

"They all say, 'Oh, riding, that's a liability,'" said Roxanne Lawrence, Executive Director of the Interscholastic



Denisha Spruell Photography/USEF Archive

*Opposite page (l-r): Stone Bridge Farm's trainer, Lilly DeSousa, with IEA team member, Elizabeth Campbell, after a show. Grace Glover is an example of an IEA team member that has gone on to national-level competition. • Above: The traditional letterman's jacket looks even better with the new USEF High School Equestrian Athlete Program achievement badge sewn on it.*



Courtesy Laura Moran

Equestrian Association (IEA), a national organization launched in 2002 that also promotes riding and competing for middle and secondary school kids. “But you know, football is a liability too,” she added. “It’s a very easy penalty flag to throw.”

Kids who become members of IEA instead (students and coaches pay a small annual membership) set up teams at any barn or stable willing to participate that can consist of kids from different schools but must have at least three people to compete. “When we started IEA we wanted the teams to be school affiliated,” said Lawrence. “Unfortunately we found we couldn’t just walk in the front door and say please let us put teams in your school. So a team can certainly have a school affiliation, but it’s not a requirement for IEA.”

Similarly, the Minnesota High School Equestrian Association (MHSEA), one of the many individual statewide organizations (California, New Hampshire, Oregon, Michigan, and Washington also have programs), helps high school riders set up “athletic clubs” that represent the school—an approach that has proved successful. “We are an independent provider, not administered or sanctioned by the school district,” said Executive Director Laura Moran. “We’re considered a sport but we’re called an athletic club with varsity recognition.”

The MHSEA, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, has more than 30 clubs statewide (members also pay small annual dues) and has come a long way since its inception in 2001. “We need to gain approval at each school every year,” said Moran. “But since the school has no responsi-

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bility or liability, and our program doesn’t cost them money, it allows us to continue. Now, when we approach schools it’s not that difficult to gain approval. Nine years ago it could take up to three years.”

The USEF program will also not be officially affiliated with any specific learning institutions, but does provide schools with updates and information about the students. “We’re hoping this will initiate conversations with the schools,” said Mellenkamp, “and that they will start taking notice of the equestrians who are enrolled.”

While there are still trouble spots, many of the people involved in promoting high school equestrians agree that the school systems are beginning to take notice. “They are coming around,” said Katrina Weinig, owner of the Virginia-based Stone Bridge Farm, which participates in the IEA program. “Last year I found the county school board was excited about it. They viewed it as a real asset, something they couldn’t do within their publicly funded PE program, so they were thrilled to have a private entity step in and help.”

Weinig points out that intercollegiate competition, now an integral part of college sports, faced the same obstacles 15 or 20 years ago, and feels programs like IEA and others are on the same track.



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Top: Last year’s Edina High School Equestrian Club members. • Above: Members of the Stone Bridge Farm IEA team ready for competition. • Opposite, top: Liza Towell Boyd, yet another IEA rider, is shown with partner, Brunello, in their victory at the AHJF Hunter Classic Spectacular of Palm Beach. The rider had many great memories alongside other IEA athletes. • Opposite, below: The newly created badge of the USEF High School Equestrian Athlete program is a gaining attention across the country.

"I have found that most school administrators are happy to listen. I just keep them informed. We have to show them that we are legitimate trainers and that we have legitimate teams, and the kids are getting a lot of benefits from it."

In addition to recognition, there are numerous other advantages for high schoolers. And benefits, it seems, are the one topic upon which everyone agrees. For starters, there's better horsemanship. Kids participating in the interscholastic teams show a different horse at each competition (it's based on a draw) with little to no warm-up allowed. This helps build skills and instinct in a way individual riding often can't. The kids also learn the value of teamwork, get good preparation for future intercollegiate competition, and enjoy the team spirit. "Riding with the team makes me push myself," said Andrew Kalasky, 15, a Stone Bridge rider who competes in the IEA program, as well as individually on his local "A" circuit. "Being part of a team means riding your best because you're not only riding for yourself, but for your team, and you can't let them down."

Membership has its monetary privileges, too. Kalasky is one of several Stone Bridge students who were helped financially by the program when he was awarded a Stone Bridge/IEA scholarship that was donated to the team. "The scholarship helps me pay for additional lessons," added Kalasky, who also works as jump crew at many shows to help fund his sport.

Many of the country's high school equestrian programs work to offer cash scholarships to graduating seniors, too. "We offer them to those who make it to the National Finals," said IEA's Lawrence. "Last year the lowest amount we gave was \$400 to a beginner rider and \$1,000 to an upper level rider."

California's Orange County Interscholastic Equestrian League (OCIEL), a statewide program launched in 1993, also offers graduating seniors scholarships that range from \$500 to \$3,500, but has chosen to make the awards as much about citizenship and academic achievement as they are about riding. "There is a criteria that the students have to meet," said Diana Ramsey, OCIEL's Founding President. "It's based on years in the program, their SATS, their grades. Also, what



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they've done in the community is extremely important to us. We also require a letter from their trainer, a school counselor and there is an essay the students have to write."

And there are other ways interscholastic programs foot the bill. "It's a relatively affordable way for young riders to train and compete," said Weinig. "Riders don't need their own horse or equipment and so their expenses are minimal compared to horse showing generally."

Each high school team program throughout the country is working in its own way to acknowledge equestrians, and each is growing faster than the wall at a Puissance Stakes. "We have gone from three clubs in 2001 to more than 30 clubs today and have a waiting list," said MHSEA's Moran. "I have received many requests from people across the country inquiring about how to set up a program."

"We started this idea with a single invitational event with 60 riders," said Lawrence. "Now we're at regional, zone and national levels and have 3,000 members."

For some, though, there are more significant ways to measure success than facts and figures. "It's extremely rewarding," said OCIEL's Ramsey. "When those kids come in with their blue ribbons and they get their prizes, and say, 'Oh, my gosh, we've had so much fun,' that's it. The kids are fabulous, just fabulous."

