

***College and continuing an equestrian dream can co-exist.***

*by Kelsey Holmes*

Every junior rider dreads the inevitable point in their lives when they believe that they are forced to choose between pursuing a professional riding career and venturing off to college.

For me there was no decision; I was going to college whether I wanted to or not. But the idea of the classic college experience excited me, and I understood that that would mean taking a step back from competition for a while.



In high school, the Monday morning after a weekend I spent at a horse show, my friends would always gossip about all the fun they had going to school dances or football games and would tell me how much I missed out. Yet for some reason that I can't explain, I would always pick a horse show over a beach bonfire. I thought that maybe college was the time for me finally to be a "normal" teenager.

I began to applying to schools all over the nation that I thought would best fit me, purposefully

avoiding looking for nearby trainers and barns to keep my horse. As I started to get acceptance letters (and some deferrals), I found I had made a mistake. I began to realize how lucky I am to have a passion, one that drives me to want to be better in all aspects of my life, not just in riding, and how to work for it. Not everyone at my age has this in his or her life, and sometimes people never even find it.

I am not a “typical teenager,” nor do I ever want to be. Luckily, with the full support of my parents and the stars aligning in my favor, I was accepted into one of my dream universities only a 30-minute drive from my barn. I had a dream school and a dream barn, but how would I still manage riding and competing through the rigors of the academics at my university?

I was constantly asked during the second semester of my senior year what my plans were for college and riding, by everyone from my peers to professional eventers. My response was always: “I really don’t know, we will see what happens.” I did not want to make a decision because I feared that competing was going to just become something I did in grade school as it does for many people.

Riding is something I knew I would keep up with no matter what. It is something that is so much a part of me that I think if I ever stopped it would feel like a part of my life was missing. I wanted so badly to make it work, but I did not know what college would be like so I wasn’t sure how.

Fortunately, the idea of riding through college was proved possible to me by my two best friends, Lexie Thacker and Lisa Takada. Lexie is a junior at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo studying Animal Science to become a veterinarian. Lisa is a sophomore at the University of Southern California studying Public Relations.

The one piece of advice they always give me is to prioritize. If it means that you’re waking up at 5 a.m. to go ride your horse or missing a competition because you need to study for midterms, then so be it. We were recently talking about how different our lives would be without riding. It was never mentioned how we might have more of a social life or have better grades, we all felt that we would lose our sense of purpose without it. All our childhood goals and dreams were always centered on horses and riding and competing showed us what it took and how it felt to reach them. If this is what drives us to get out of bed in the morning, college should definitely not be the time to quit.

### **Making It Happen**

I specifically remember when I realized that I could make it all possible. I was cross-country schooling at Twin Rivers about a month before I left for college with my trainer, Jennifer Wooten of Trinity Eventing. We were standing under the oak tree in the bottom field of the course and she asked me what my plan for the rest of the season was. She had probably asked me this question about 10 times before, and I always seemed to find a way not to answer it. Yet, I finally came to terms with my denial of my upcoming situation and told her I was probably not going to compete as much as I did before.

She looked at me and said, "If you want it bad enough, you will make it happen."

With the help of her and so many others, I did make it work. It truly takes a village to help me achieve my goals. From Jennifer making me believe in myself, to my dressage trainer Carly Taylor-Smith for keeping my horse fit and ready to compete, and most importantly to my parents for backing me and supporting me to keep pursuing my dreams. My gratitude for them could never be put into a simple thank you.

Of course, there was and probably will be many more bumps in the road along the way but the team I have behind me keeps me moving in the right direction. I figured out quickly that riding six days a week was no longer an option, and that having one competition horse was probably as much as I can handle. In order to make it work, you have to compromise. You might have to miss a football tailgate to go cross-country schooling or write an essay in the tack stall using the Wi-Fi hot spot from your phone, but the reality is that you have to make it work.

Now a year later after the application process, I am in the midst of my second quarter at the University of California, Los Angeles studying Cognitive Science and am competing at the FEI two-star level in eventing with my horse NZB The Chosen One.

College is all about new, exciting, and sometimes scary things, and having that constant of my horse and riding in my life has been a huge comfort and has kept me sane through it all. The saying is true: you learn a lot about yourself in college. Having a riding career in college is a major catalyst for that process; it forces you to come to terms with your goals and pushes you toward the direction you really want your life to go in. I'm privileged to be able to keep riding in college with the incredible support of my parents, an amazing trainer, and a whole village behind me, but I am where I am today because I want it, so I make it work. Whether that's

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competing your own horse Beginner Novice or Intermediate, or riding for your school's equestrian team, if you want it badly enough, you'll make it work.