

Everybody wants Zone 10 riders atop the NAJYRC podium, but there's debate about the best way to get there.

by Kim F. Miller

As young jumper riders battled to represent Zone 10 at this month's FEI/Adequan North American Junior Young Rider Championships, behind-the-scenes debates roiled about the best way to qualify teams in the future.

Everybody wants the same thing: getting the zone back to its streak of dominance that began a decade ago. From 2007 to 2010, Zone 10 earned a total of nine gold medals, including team and individuals. The years from 2011 through 2013 saw Killian McGrath's individual YR gold and team bronze in 2012, and Young Rider team silver and individual bronze in 2011. Last year's Young Rider team brought home bronze and the Juniors scored silver, but 2014 and 2015 were medal-less outings. (See sidebar for the decade's medal count.)

The question is how to get Zone 10 squads regularly back atop the podium.

Zone 10's current system of selection trials has been in place for many years and has many supporters. This year the three-month qualifying period included three regular trials, starting at HITS Coachella in mid-March and closed with a mandatory finals consisting of four jumping rounds, June 8-11, in San Juan Capistrano.

Supporters say the trials system ensures head-to-head competition over courses built to Championship standards, with a final that replicates the multi-phase format of the Championships. The necessity of peaking a horse/rider pair at the right time, just before the Championships, is another plus of the system, supporters assert, as is the way it builds camaraderie and team spirit along the way.

Nationally, however, the rest of the United Hunter Jumper Association's 12 zones have moved

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to a money-won qualifying process and various national committees want Zone 10 (California and Nevada) to get on board.

Supporters say a system using national rankings based on money-won is a better fit for a changing sport. In their view, this method allows applicants to qualify geographically anywhere, on their own schedule and in competitions that would best prepare them for victory at the Championships. Many like the idea of standardization in qualifying for all steps in the new show jumping “pathway” that steers riders, starting with the new Childrens 12-14 division.

“There is a desire to have all the zones use the same process,” explains Charlotte Skinner-Robson, chair of the USHJA’s Jumper Working Group and a member of other national committees that have debated this topic over the years. Earlier this year, standardizing the process across all zones was discussed and approved in a meeting with chairs and vice-chairs, including Zone 10’s, she explains. “It was after that that a couple of Zone 10 professionals decided they really wanted to stay with the trials.”

A Big Surprise

Shocked to hear of the switch to money-won, starting in 2018, Karen Healey was chief among those. In an open letter to the industry, she detailed her strong support for the trials system. (See, Candid With Karen, this issue) That was a big catalyst for discussions that resulted in the Jumper Working Group asking Zone 10 to submit its own proposal for the qualifying process going forward.

As of presstime, Zone 10 co-chair Ned Glynn was encouraged by the mid-June state of affairs. While the details of their proposal were still being hammered out, Ned explained that it included a combination of non-mandatory trials and the chance to qualify through the national money-won rankings. “The nuts and bolts of the proposal are that portions of the team can qualify through both systems. We keep the integrity of our head-to-head system by promoting our trials and making them really good classes so that if people are going for the money, they’ll want to do it in our region.

“The strongest feedback that we get, and speaking for myself as a trainer, is that the experience these kids get doing the trials is great,” continues Ned, who operates Sonoma Valley Stables in Petaluma with his wife Hope Glynn. “The kids, the horses, the trainers, the owners all learn

about FEI rules and how to handle a multi-day competition.” He emphasizes that the trials classes are firm in upholding the course standards faced at the Championship. “We want to avoid the case where someone who qualifies takes a long trip and has a very bad experience. I think the trials make our team more prepared to do well when they get there, to peak at the right time and hopefully bring back some medals.”

Charlotte emphasizes that Zone 10 has many terrific riders and horses, but disagrees about the preparatory benefits of the current trials system. She cites the final Sunday rounds this year as supporting evidence: Six Young Rider pairs competed and, of those, two fell off at the second fence and only three went on to the second course. “That is evidence to a number of us that this is not working.”

The trials were really good when they were conceived, she continues. At the time, Zone 10 did not have today’s quantity of rigorous Grand Prix classes. “But a lot has changed. There are a lot more opportunities for that age group and the trials are stopping them from being able to participate in some of those.” This year’s final phase, for example, overlapped with a Nations Cup in Langley, B.C. and the start of the Spruce Meadows summer circuit in Calgary.

“Our feeling is that it’s really difficult for kids who don’t want to show in Zone 10,” she continues. With the Junior age cap at 18 and the Young Riders at 21, college-aged riders or working students living elsewhere aren’t able to compete for a spot under the current system. “This year we had two college riders disappointed because they couldn’t participate because they’re in school,” she says.

Another college rider, University of Georgia freshman Sydney Hutchins, did qualify as an alternate on the YR team by flying home from school.

Inclusion: A Mutual Priority

Inclusion is a priority on both sides. Money-won opponents, like Karen Healey, feel it encourages “trailer racing,” could promote overuse of the horse and excludes candidates who don’t have the budget to travel. Conversely, trial opponents assert that the requirement to compete locally penalizes those able to compete anywhere and who might be the best prepared to win because they’ve done so.

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Claiming that the money-won system is unfair to the less affluent is an unconstructive argument, Charlotte asserts. With Young Riders competition held at 1.45-1.50M fence heights, the reality is “If you don’t have a Grand Prix horse you can’t compete.

“One could say that it’s unfair that you have to have a Grand Prix horse, so we should make that competition lower, but (with that way of thinking) they won’t be going to the Olympics either. This is the Olympics for these guys. It’s the only FEI Youth Championship in this country.”

And, she asserts, the money-won system doesn’t leave non-travelers out of the running. Blenheim EquiSports and HITS Coachella are two circuits that “have \$25,000 Grand Prix every week.” The money-won qualifying process caps points at \$25,000, she clarifies. “You don’t get a bump for going to Spruce Meadows or Wellington and riding in a \$100,000 class. You still get credit as if it was a \$25,000 class. In my mind, that makes it quite equal and fair.”

Charlotte and Ned indicated that Zone 10’s latest proposal was a workable solution and it was expected that the new qualifying process would be finalized this month. Stay tuned!

The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at kimfmiller1@mac.com or 949-644-2165.

Zone 10 NAJYRC Results over the last decade

2016

YR: Team Bronze: Mackenzie Drazan, Hannah Heidegger, Chandler Meadows, Uma O’Neill

JR: Team Silver: Sydney Hutchins, Dalan Laughlin, Hunter Siebel, Sarah Baz

2015 & 2014

No medals

2013

YR: Team Silver: for team of Hayley Schwab and Hannah von Heidegger, combined with two Zone 8 riders.

2012

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YR: Individual Gold: Killian McGrath;

YR: Team Bronze: Sage Flynn, Stevie Sorenson, Charlotte Gadbois, Killian McGrath

2011

YR: Team Silver: Cayla Richards, Danielle Korsh, Sage Flynn, Kendall Skreden

YR: Individual Bronze: Danielle Korsh

2010

YR: Team Gold: Richard Neal, Taylor Siebel, Saer Coulter, Lucy Davis

JR: Team Silver: Kendall Skreden, Joceyln Neff, Lindsay Douglas, Audrey Coulter

JR: Individual Bronze: Jocelyn Neff

2009

YR: Team Bronze: Saer Coulter, Adrienne Dixon, Paris Sellon, Karl Cook

YR: Individual Silver: Lucy Davis

JR: Team Gold: Samantha Harrison, Taylor Siebel, Alec Lawler, Richard Neal

JR: Individual Silver: Samantha Harrison

Jr: Individual Bronze: Richard Neal

2008

YR: Team Gold: Hannah Selleck, Paige Dotson, Sophie Benjamin, Karl Cook,

YR: Individual Gold: Hannah Selleck

YR: Individual Silver: Karl Cook

YR: Individual Bronze: Paige Dotson

JR: Team Gold: Alec Lawler, Annie Laurie Cook, Savannah Carr, Lucy Davis

JR: Individual Gold: Lucy Davis

2007

YR: Team Gold: Megan Edrick, Katie Harris, Aurora Griffin, Karl Cook

YR: Individual Gold: Karl Cook

YR: Individual Bronze: Aurora Griffin

JR: Team Gold: Paige Dotson, Danielle Korsh, Meredith Hursh, Saer Coulter

2006

JR: Team Silver: Paris Sellon, Erica Buie, Aurora Griffin, Hannah Selleck

JR: Individual Bronze: Paris Sellon