



Stanford wins 13th consecutive intercollegiate zone championship in region rapidly getting bigger and better.

by Kim F. Miller

Intercollegiate Horse Show Association competition is bursting at the seams in the national organization's Zone 8, especially in the primarily Northern and Southern California Regions 1 and 2. Participation growth is such that Region 2 has a moratorium on new teams and Region 1 is close to needing one as leaders work on expanding capacity to accommodate more schools that want to join the circuit.

The growth, however, has done nothing to dampen the dominance of Stanford Equestrian, which won its 13th consecutive Zone championship April 7 on its home turf in Palo Alto.

Is it getting old? "Not at all!" says Vanessa Bartsch, Stanford's coach of 14 years. With four regions competing at the Zone finals this year, "Everyone had points on the board and it's always a nail biter." The Cardinal won with 46 points, followed by Colorado State University's 40; USC's 36; and Central Washington's 14.

As Zone 8 reserve champion, Colorado State will join Stanford in the cross-country trek to Harrisburg, PA, where the IHSA National Finals are set for May 3-6. Last year, Stanford finished a very impressive third overall, University of Southern California tied for 10th in team standings, and individual riders representing UC Davis and Cal State Fullerton also did the West Coast proud.

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“There has been an exponential increase in the quality of riding from all of the schools in our Zone,” Vanessa reports. “That continues to push us to be better, train harder and find nicer horses to bring in. The overall quality of the teams and riders that we were competing against was exceptional. It made it competitive and fun. As a coach, it promotes our whole area to be the best that we can be.”

Now numbering 400 member schools and close to 10,000 riders, the 51-year-old IHSA continues a growth pattern that has surprised some. Most IHSA teams are run as “club” sports, rather than athletic-department sponsored “varsity” sports. Although the nature of member teams varies widely, club status generally means that organization and funding come primarily from student riders. When NCAA Equestrian, the varsity version now called “NCEA Equestrian,” was created 20 years ago, there was widespread concern it would trigger a decline in IHSA participation. The opposite has been true, especially in California.

Vanessa reports steep increases in the number of hopefuls for invitational and walk-on opportunities at Stanford Equestrian. An alumna herself, she relays that teammates of her era and earlier joke that they could never make the team if they tried out now. “I’m not sure about that, but the quality of kids we have coming in now is amazing.”

The sources are many-fold. “You have kids who rode well and want to ride in college and Stanford is a place where you can do that. You also have kids who rode well, but who, in the ‘olden’ days, wouldn’t go out for the team if it wasn’t good. Now it’s the exception, rather than the rule, that a high-level rider would come to Stanford and not go out for the team.” Exceptions do still include professional show jumpers like 2016 Olympian Lucy Davis, two-time HITS Million winner Nayel Nassar and Jennifer Gates. Competing at that level leaves little time to be on the team, but these riders typically help out in other ways.

With its own lovely equestrian center in the historic Red Barn, Stanford has many advantages in luring top talent. That’s balanced, however, by an acceptance rate that was 4.29 percent this year, and an admission process not influenced by suitability for the riding squad.

A fast-growing feeder system also fuels IHSA interest. The Interscholastic Equestrian Association and the newer Athletic Equestrian League funnel middle and high school age riders into a competitive world that previously might not have been within reach for many families. “The IEA is like a mini-IHSA and those numbers are off the chart,” says Vanessa. As in the IHSA, horse ownership is not required of IEA or AEL riders because mounts are provided by the

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team for practices and by the host school for tournaments. These leagues make competition and deeper involvement more affordable.

Two of Stanford's top point-earners are IEA products. Cecilia Lang-Ree never owned her own horse in high school. Instead, she was one of the Red Barn's first IEA team members, and is now heading to Nationals for the fourth time. Virginia native Kelsi Okun is another IEA graduate, now going to Harrisburg as Zone 8's Cacchione Cup contender.



Accommodating Growth

As Zone 1 president, Vanessa is part of discussions on how to accommodate the increasing interest, a subject sure to continue during June board meetings. “We’ve talked about adding a third region (to California), but we’re at a tenuous point because Regions 1 and 2 are uncomfortably large, but if we added a third region now it would be uncomfortably small.”

Facilities able and willing to host competitions are the limiting factor in opening the region to more teams. Finding available horses is another challenge. That challenge has intensified with the growth of IEA, notes Peter Cashman, the IHSA's first vice president and longtime coach of the equestrian team at United States Military Academy-West Point in New York. Peter stresses that he is fully in support of the high school equestrian programs but the fact that they clamor for the same resources – venues and horses—is a problem that needs to be sorted out.

On a national level, the IHSA is working to address these impediments. One avenue is working

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with the United States Equestrian Federation and the United States Hunter Jumper Association to promote schools as a good second career home for members' horses. At West Point, "Our horses jump maybe twice a week, at 2'6", and for them that's a vacation." The hope is to establish a database in which an owner can look for schools within a set distance, and schools can state their priorities and requirements for donated horses.

Regarding demand for facilities, Peter hopes that better communication between high school and collegiate teams will result in agreeing to share a weekend, or otherwise avoid conflicting schedules.

Reducing the number of riders competing for each team is another idea to make room for more schools.

The Juggernaut's Impact

Peter's West Point team has many years' experience competing against a long-dominant school. For them in IHSA Zone 3, it's Centenary College in New Jersey, which has been a Zone champion for 20 years. "We try very hard to keep Centenary at bay all year long, but in the end we realize they are representing us. We help them make the Finals because every week in Zone competition their riders are challenged." As Stanford and Colorado State head to the Nationals, they should be considered "one team: the Zone united," he says.

Like Stanford, Centenary has its advantages, in their case an equine studies program with course work that complements team participation. Some people can "get cranky sometimes and say it's not fair," acknowledges Peter, but he's not one of them. Competition in any zone can be fierce, but it's never "nasty," he continues. "These kids are in college and that should be their first goal. Second is to enjoy riding, have something that gets their head out of school work and an automatic group of friends with whom they share a love of the horse."



Riding for a juggernaut or not, the IHSA experience is unique and appealing. Accomplished amateur jumper rider and “R” judge Marnye Langer enjoyed officiating the Zone 8 Regional finals at Stanford, wishing all the while that IHSA had been thriving out West during her college years. Even from the judge’s booth vantage point, the unique IHSA camaraderie and team spirit were obvious, she notes.

Because entrants compete on unfamiliar horses, judging collegiate competition requires a slightly different perspective than judging open shows. “I focus on what kind of decision they make based on the horse they are riding,” Marnye explains. Even in the Walk Trot division, “Are they aware their horse is pokey or wants to cheat the corner? What do they do about it?”

A member of leadership committees in the hunter/jumper industry, Marnye is among many concerned about lack of growth in the discipline. She agrees with conventional wisdom that riders who continue, or start the sport, in college are more likely to carry on with it through adulthood. “If you can learn to ride in college and be your team’s best beginning rider, earning the same points as the Open Equitation rider, how awesome is that?” For all riders, “It allows them the opportunity to stay connected. I think the longer anyone stays connected to it, the more desire they’ll have to continue with it, or come back to it after a break, in adulthood.”

“People want to know where the 18-24 year-olds are in our sport,” Peter notes. “Well, we have them! And we feel that we are helping them understand what the next level of riding can be for them in adulthood.”

IHSA’s steady member growth occurs even though approximately 2,000 members a year are lost to graduation. At the same time, IHSA alumni membership is strong as another bridge to lifelong involvement.

An Unusual Year

The arrival of “my first and last” baby just as the school year got underway in September added serious variety to Vanessa’s 14th year as Stanford Equestrian head coach. “It really gave me an

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understanding of how much support we have for this team.” Assistant coach Tina Davey and Gwyn Gordon (Vanessa’s coach as a student) captained the ship, with big assists from Red Barn-based professionals, including Guy Thomas, Allie Qutub, Rachel Williamson, Leslie Wright and Cindy Brooks. “When I stepped back in, they handed me back a team that was as strong as it could be. I understand now how people in the equestrian world are able to have families. There is more support there than you can dream of. That was special for me.”

For more information on the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association, visit www.ihainc.com .

Going To Nationals

Zone 8 schools (from Regions 1 and 2) advance a combined 10 athletes on to the National Finals in individual classes. They are:

- High Point Cacchione Cup Kelsi Okun of Stanford.
- Individual Intermediate Fences: champion Irini Pateras from Cal Poly, SLO and reserve champion Jackie Marks from USC
- Individual Intermediate Flat: Hannah Hroblack from Cal Poly, Pomona and reserve champ Aleena Karamally from UCSD
- Individual Walk Trot Canter: Christine Wastilla from UCLA, reserve champ Ivy Kaplan from Cal Poly, SLO
- Individual Novice Flat: reserve champion Cecilia Lang-Ree from Stanford
- Individual Walk Trot: champion Michelle Villaseno from Sonoma State, reserve champion Courtney Debrunner from Sonoma State.

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