

Written by by Alexa Corse, Stanford Class of 2019  
Thursday, 31 May 2018 19:15

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### ***First-timer's reflections on a unique team experience.***

*by Alexa Corse, Stanford Class of 2019*

The announcer's voice resounded throughout the indoor equestrian arena at Lake Erie College, the site of the Intercollegiate Dressage Association National Championship last month: "Our next rider is Alexa Corse."

I reminded myself to breathe and rode into the arena. The cavernous space was surprisingly quiet, until the judge at the arena's far end rang a small, old-fashioned bell. That was my cue. I rode down the centerline of the dressage court—the 20x60 meter area bordered with low, white rails—in which I'd perform Training Level Test 1.



Equestrian isn't often thought of as a team sport, but the Intercollegiate Dressage Association (and the Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association for hunter and western rider disciplines) is an exception. Each college fields a lineup of four riders, and each rider's score affects the team's total. Since fall, riders from more than 50 colleges had competed to qualify for 12 team spots at Nationals over several regular-season competitions. By placing first among California teams this year, our Stanford University team earned a trip to Nationals, held in a suburb of Cleveland, OH.

"Competing with a team is not something we do that often in dressage," said my teammate Abby Fleischli. "It makes the opportunity to represent your school in a national championship really special."

By the horse show's end, our team notched a sixth-place finish, the highest-ever for Stanford dressage. Fleischli, a freshman, contributed with a second-place finish among First Level riders, the most advanced level at Nationals.

At Upper Training Level, the next highest, sophomore Maggie Bruck added a fifth-place finish to our team total. I, a junior at Stanford, placed 11th at Lower Training Level and freshman Lucy Edy finished 10th at the Introductory Level to complete our team score.

Some riders at Nationals competed in only the individual competition on Saturday or the team competition on Sunday, although many did both. With another second-place finish in the individual competition, Fleischli earned the title of Reserve National Champion twice in one weekend. Stanford's other results in individual competitions were Bruck's fourth-place finish in Upper Training and Edy's third place in Introductory.

Karen Bach from California Polytechnic State University rounded out this year's list of California riders at Nationals. Bach competed as an individual in the Lower Training Level, placing 10th.

### **First Timers**

None of my teammates had been part of a Nationals-qualifying team before, while one previously went to Nationals as an individual. For me, the most rewarding aspect of this experience was the camaraderie. The night before the show began, we took turns skipping around the living room of our Airbnb marking the steps of our routines, as if we were in an equestrian arena, and gave each other feedback. At the show, we helped each other polish boots and never missed watching a teammate's turn in the arena.

Bruck's favorite moment was when our team excitedly surrounded her by the scoreboard, as soon as her fourth place finish in the individual competition was announced. "Last year, I was the only rider from Stanford to qualify for Nationals," said Bruck, who placed ninth in the Lower Training Level in 2017. "This year, what really made it special was the amazing support from my teammates."

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Our sport has another unique—and often quite challenging—dimension. We “catch ride.” Instead of trailering our team’s horses to shows, we use horses provided by the host college. So, at a show I’m given 10 minutes to practice on a horse I’ve never ridden before. Then, I’ll ride my test on the still rather unfamiliar horse. (Colleges try to take turns hosting shows so that no one owns the home-field advantage.)

Because dressage emphasizes precision and communication with the horse, catch riding is particularly challenging. Still, it’s taught me persistence and to make the best of the things that are within my control in any situation, which are traits that also apply to life outside of the dressage court.

“Since collegiate dressage requires you to quickly adapt to an unknown horse, it presents challenges that really test and strengthen your riding abilities,” Fleischli said.

At Nationals, I randomly drew Kermit, a chestnut horse whom Otterbein University had brought with them for the show. After watching and taking notes while non-competing riders warmed up the horses, I was itching to ride. Kermit proved to be as lovable as his cartoon namesake, and I placed 11th to cap off my first year competing at Lower Training Level and my first trip to Nationals.

“It was so cool to see how much progress we all made throughout the year, in our riding ability and our overall strength as a team,” reflected Edy.

We couldn’t have made such progress without our large support system. I don’t think Dressage Coach Kate Douglas ever left our side at Nationals as she calmed nerves and offered riding advice. Head Coach Vanessa Bartsch, Assistant Coach Tina Davey and dressage coach Rachel Williamson had prepared us well through dedicated work all year and sent their enthusiasm to us at Nationals through constant motivational text messages and e-mails, as did our entire team of dressage, western and hunt seat riders.

“To have that culminate in a great weekend of traveling as a team to Nationals and having our hard work rewarded was so meaningful,” Edy said. “I could not be more proud of our team.”

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*For more information on the Intercollegiate Dressage Association, visit [www.teamdressage.com](http://www.teamdressage.com). For more information on the Stanford Equestrian Team, visit [set.stanford.edu](http://set.stanford.edu)*