

Growth & affordability are key topics at US Eventing Association convention.

by Dawn Robbins, co-coordinator of Area VI Adult Riders Program • photos by Anthony Trollope

The USEA Convention took place in Washington D.C. from Dec. 2-6. My overall impressions were that the convention was well attended (over 400 people from around the country), well organized by USEA staff and that my presence was appreciated and my input was welcome. Overall, it was a very good experience and I would recommend attending this event in the future. The next one is in Fort Lauderdale, FL, in December of this year.



On a personal level, one of the cool things about this meeting is just walking around and running into the high performance riders who we often read about regularly, right there, in the flesh. Yeah, it sounds silly, but for me it's pretty cool. Kinda like my conversation with Phillip Dutton at Galway last year on my way to dressage. It went like this, me: "Good luck Phillip", him: "Thanks." That counts as a conversation, right? I was able to meet a number of my eventing idols, so that was fun.

Anyway, on to the real stuff...

Here are some of my meeting notes: I attended meetings of the committees that I'm involved in, but there were many other sessions that I couldn't get to, unfortunately.

Membership

USEA membership is increasing. There are 12,142 members, which is the highest since the

recession in 2008. The number of starts is also on the rise. The membership committee is actively involved in trying to increase membership further to strengthen the sport in the long term.

One idea that received a lot of attention before the convention was the Beginner Novice Authorized Assistance division, which is something many USEA members brought up as a way to bring in new people to the sport.

One aspect of this idea that many did not realize is that the rules already allow for such a division when run as a test (like the Tests of Choice that we often see on the day before Horse Trials on the West Coast). So, organizers can use this test option whenever they wish. Or, they can ignore it - their choice. The purpose is to provide a welcoming environment for new competitors to get started in the sport. Some organizers are very excited, others not so much.

This committee also addressed the issue of “scope creep” at the BN level by sending recommendations to the course designers. These included having an option for all ditches and water jumps, having steps up but not down and having a combination on course of two or three strides. The idea is to reinforce that BN should be welcoming and build confidence in new competitors rather than potentially eliminating large numbers of riders.

A contentious issue is area realignment. Rather than modify area boundaries, it was proposed that USEA members could simply assign their own Area when they renew their memberships each year. If you're in Area II, you could assign yourself to Area III for the year. This makes sense for those living near state boundaries, for example. You would be part of all of your new Area's programs. This is under study and will be reviewed at the next Board meeting as details are worked out.

Safety

There were proposed rule changes regarding helmets and vests - both proposals have been sent back to FEI to re-word. People were worried that they would have to purchase new helmets and vests, but this is not the case at this time. Stay tuned...

There is ongoing discussion about having a safety standard for air vests. Air vests are going to

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be tested independently, sort of like they do for helmets. Various organizations are involved in testing and writing standards. We will be hearing about their results in the near future.

Frangible pins - A committee has been looking at these fence designs extensively and a study by the University of Kentucky and British Eventing is in process.

One member of the Safety Committee showed pictures of some examples of poor and very dangerous cross-country jumps that he found on a course this year (not in California). There is currently a push toward certification for course builders to address these safety concerns.

There is concern about caring for an injured rider's horse when that rider is unable to do so, especially if they're alone. A policy of providing this information in advance to show secretaries is being developed, but meanwhile, make sure you leave details of your horse's care, feed, etc. with a trainer, friend, or at least somewhere obvious.

General - Board of Governors

Year in review - The USEA is in great shape, no debt, growing membership and programs, including strong Young Rider and Adult Rider programs and a Young and Future Event horse program with 78 entries this year. Jo Whitehouse is leaving after 17 years as CEO and 30 years with the organization. Rob Burke is taking over as CEO.

Frangible pin study - There has been a donation of \$25,000 to start this study, but it is a match so there will be a fundraising effort in the next several months. Members will be getting more information shortly.

USEF High Performance Update - Rio looks very good with completely redesigned barns and footing - the venue is almost ready. Accommodation and transport in Rio is a challenge; it will be a difficult Games for spectators. Across the world, eventing numbers are up.

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USEA Foundation - This was originally a building fund but now it involves: 1. A large rainy day fund in case of some catastrophic event such as an equine disease; 2. Grants such as the Broussard grants, Amy Tryon grant, Seema Sonnad grant, and others; and 3. USEA special projects fund, covering items such as horse safety studies at the discretion of the Board.

Young Rider Championships – At the two star level, Young Riders will be competing within a CICO** format.

Adult Riders (AR)

All of the 10 USEA Areas were represented by their AR Coordinators this year. The Adult Team Championships during the American Eventing Championships will go forward this year, although there are small changes in qualifications for ATC eligibility. These will be outlined on the USEA website. Since the AECs will be in Tryon, NC, it is unlikely that a significant number of West Coast Adult Riders will attend. Therefore, Area VI will again present the regional Adult Team Challenge. More information coming soon!

Each Area presented their best ideas on AR activities - camps, clinics and various types of competitions are offered for ARs throughout the country. The Adult Rider program is open to both amateurs and professionals over age 21.

USEA Summit

The Summit was well attended. It was run like a town hall meeting, with six or seven initial short presentations:

Eventing Costs - Derek di Grazia - Eventing is very expensive, especially to really compete. There are ways to save money. The East has more one and two day events, the Midwest has two and three day events, while the West has all three days. We need to look at this issue.

Membership Growth - Brian Sabo - Brian made the point that it is important to work within the USEA rather than outside of the organization. If you're angry, get involved and make the USEA better. He says our membership growth model is flawed. We need more beginner programs; this is the key to the growth in membership.

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Organizer's Perspective - Wendy Wergeles - She talked about trying to determine how to set up a calendar that works better for competitors and how to keep costs down - right now they do not have a business model that is working. Many organizers are losing money. They are setting up a separate committee of eventing organizers to work on these issues. (I learned later that there is already an Organizers Committee, so this is a separate group of USEA members).

Calendar and Pricing - Rob Law - 72% of our USEA riders do not go above Preliminary. So there are about 5,000 or so active riders who do an average of 5.4 starts per year. That's not a big market. He wants to market to these people. He wants more data - wants to understand them better. Unrecognized shows can do a lot more, shorter time (one day), and be profitable. And, people going to the unrecognized shows are the primary new member market. He wants to change the calendar to allow organizers to market to their customers better under the USEA. The USEA is the glue for the organizers, but organizers need more freedom to make their customers and potential customers happy.



ICP and Education - Jeannie Clarke - She represents the professionals who are not amateur riders and who are not 'podium riders'. Her experience with the ICP is that it provided structure, a society of professionals and support for learning and expanding experiences. She wants more representation for this group and more interaction/participation in the event world.

Professionals - Tamra Smith, Professional Horseman's Council - The sport is changing and the professional can be the key in managing this change. She focused on looking forward, not driving forward while "looking in the rear view mirror." We are all working together in this and we should raise ourselves together, professionals and amateurs and everyone else.

Adult Amateur Perspective - Siobhan O'Brien - Amateurs love to have fun, to collaborate with our peers, and we want to be safe. "We want more value for our eventing dollar!" Concerns and ideas are level creep (harder and harder courses at the lower levels), one day shows, DX (new proposed derby format) to get cross country experience at a lower cost, education for

volunteers through ICP, mentors for new amateurs at shows, communicating easily with the USEA, studies on equine health and safety issues. Increasing the number of ribbons at each show to include greater recognition.

Amateur Concerns

After the initial presentations, everyone split up into groups to discuss solutions. I went to the Amateur group and we had quite a large number of amateurs trying to identify key ideas/solutions. We came up with this:

Amateurs want more one day shows, derbies and so forth to get cross country experience for less money. We also want a level playing field, which means amateur divisions (many shows on the East Coast still don't do this, so amateurs often compete in Open divisions). We want more value for our dollar. Solution: We want to talk directly to the Organizing Committee about this need.

Amateurs want more leeway when eliminations occur for non-safety issues. This has been addressed with new rules (no more eliminations for wearing boots in dressage by mistake, for example) but, where possible, we want to be able to run cross-country! Amateurs drive too far and spend too much money not to be able to run. Penalize us, but let us complete when we are being safe. Solution: This is also a discussion to have with the Organizing Committee.

Do not call us hobbyists. Eventing is not a hobby for us. It's our life. We may not be as good as the high performance riders, but we give it our all to participate, learn and improve every day. Stamp collecting is a hobby. Eventing is much more to us than that. Solution: Stop saying this.

Amateurs want level creep to stop. If an organizer is going to max out the level, let us know in advance. We want a fair test, but lower level courses seem to be harder and harder. Solution: organizers can give us a better description of the courses they are building instead of saying "average for the level."

There was more, but that's the gist of it. I promised the group that I would take the concerns to the organizing committee and I did so during the Board of Governors meeting. We will start a dialog on these issues next week.

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There are going to be three similar Summit meetings around the country to review similar issues and to address concerns. There will also be a Summit Executive Summary on the USEA website shortly.

Rule Change Open Forum

The Modified Division is going forward but the idea must go back to the USEF for final approval in January. This division is an interim step between Training and Preliminary. It is available as an option to organizers. It involves a new dressage test, new XC courses at 3'5" and stadium at 3'5". The speed is 490 mpm. Qualifications include two Training completions with qualifying results. I'm not sure exactly when we might see this division in California, but it looks like 2017 because courses will have to be designed.

Show jumping specifications: In the past, there has been a 5 cm height leeway for course designers to use. This is no longer the case. However, at Preliminary Championships, it is stated that one vertical and one ascending oxer may be up to 3'9", preferably toward the latter half of the course.

Vaccinations: Competing horses do have to have the flu/rhino vaccine, but riders/owners only need to have the paperwork to prove it if announced in the omnibus or by the organizer well before the show.

Thanks to Dawn Robbins for sharing this report on the convention. In addition to being an active competitor, Dawn is co-coordinator of Area VI Adult Riders Program along with Taurie Banks. For more information on the Area VI Adults Riders program, visit www.areavi.org.

Area VI Special Award Recipients

- Tamie Smith earned the Rebecca Broussard International Riders Grant and will put it to great use, no doubt, in this Olympic year.
- The 2015 Horse of the Year and the Casar Trophy went to Mai Baum, who is owned by Alexandra and Ellen Ahearn and Eric Markell. Mai Baum is a 9-year-old German Sport Horse gelding by Loredano and out of Ramira.

The Connaught Grant was awarded for the first time this year, designed for a horse competing at the CCI1* or CCI2* level who shows potential to one day be on the U.S. Team. The first winner of the grant was presented to Charlie Tango, ridden by Heather Morris and owned by the Team Express, LLC Syndicate

Bea and Derek Di Grazia were honored with the Wofford Cup for their contributions to the sport. Donald Trotter of Sunsprite Warmbloods earned a Governor's Cup appreciation award. Laura Powell earned the Cornerstone Instructor's Award for her dedication to eventing instructors.