

Junior riders grab big opportunity at inaugural collegiate event.

HITS Desert Horse Park in Thermal hosted the top riders from the NCEA Junior Hunt Seat Medal Ranking List to compete in the inaugural West Coast NCEA Junior Hunt Seat Medal Final at National Sunshine II on Nov. 12. The West Coast NCEA Medal Final allowed pre-college equestrians to compete in the spotlight, increasing their exposure for collegiate equestrian scholarships.



Sydney McManus of Coto De Caza, topped the field of riders to win the Championship, with the Reserve Champion going to Julia Damour of Irvine. Third place went to Brooke Matson of Honolulu and rounding out the top four was Nikola Barnes of Wilton.

“The National Advisory Board of the NCEA appreciates the incredible support provided by HITS in this inaugural season for the NCEA Hunter Seat Medal,” said NCEA Executive Director Dr. Leah Fiorentino. “We see great promise in the future for exposing junior riders to the head-to-head bracket format used in NCEA competitions. Our generous sponsors certainly ensured that the competitors experienced the excitement associated with a final event. It was a pleasure to be at the beautiful Thermal venue.”

The West Coast Final followed the first-ever East Coast final at HITS Commonwealth Park in Culpeper, Virginia, in October, and riders from California, Hawaii, Arizona, Washington and Colorado turned out.

“HITS was honored to host the West Coast NCEA Medal Final at National Sunshine Series,” said HITS President and CEO Tom Struzzieri. “The East Coast event was successful, and we were pleased to put on an equally successful event for the West Coast riders.”

Riders and trainers met for a rider’s meeting in the VIP Pavilion the morning of the class to draw

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the order-of-go for the jumping and bracket phases as well as the bracket horses. Riders enjoyed breakfast and VIP passes for the weekend compliments of Marshall & Sterling. Winners received prizes from a host of sponsors including Horsecare Ireland, One-K Helmets, Fabbri Boots, EquiFit boots, ECE Equestrian Shirts, Threadneedle, Go Girl Energy Drinks and Perry Communications.

“Marshall & Sterling was pleased to sponsor this event,” said Marshall & Sterling Insurance League Representative, Joe Norick. “Our league is committed to providing a program for up-and-coming riders, so it was fitting to sponsor the NCEA finals, which is bringing awareness to junior riders with a desire to compete collegiately.”

Unique Format

The Finals consisted of three-phases: Over Fences phase, Flat phase and a Bracket phase, judged by Kim Dorfman of Aiken, South Carolina, who also judged the East Coast Final. Riders competed over a 3'3" course designed by Jerry Dougherty of Saint James City, Florida in hopes of claiming the top honor.

Riders competed under a unique format, which combined a medal-style course and a flat phase, with the bracket-style competition used at NCAA competitions.

Under the bracket format, the first place rider competed with the fourth place rider in a head-to-head round on the same horse, as did the second place against third place riders. The winners of the two semi-final brackets competed in a Championship bracket over fences on a neutral horse to determine the first-ever, NCEA Junior Hunt Seat Medal – West Coast Champion. Third and fourth place riders were determined by their combined scores in the jumping, flat, and semi-final bracket phases. The fifth through eighth place riders were determined based on the jumping and flat phase.

“On Saturday, November 12, I had an opportunity to watch the first-ever West Coast NCEA Hunt Seat Medal Final during the HITS National Sunshine Series in Thermal, California,” said NCEA National Advisory Board Member, Chuck Fry. “HITS did a great job of running the class – the weather, venue and arena were perfect for the final. As the parent of an equestrian student athlete who recently graduated from the University of South Carolina, I am very optimistic for the future of our sport.”

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Press release provided by HITS. For more information on the NCEA, visit www.varsityequestrian.com