



Bea DiGrazia and James Atkinson share upbeat outlook for Area VI eventing scene.

It's an exciting time to be part of the West Coast eventing scene. California is part of the US Eventing Association's Area VI and it's a busy place to be.



Bea & Derek diGrazia

This month's calendar starts with the Oct. 3-6 Woodside International Horse Trials and Area VI Championships, both at The Horse Park at Woodside. The next weekend, there's clinics in Northern and Southern California with British Olympian Lucinda Green. On Oct. 17-19, it's the Fresno County Horse Park Horse Trials. There's a breather the following weekend before October culminates, appropriately, with the Galway Downs International Three-Day Event and Horse Trials, which conclude Nov. 2 in Temecula. Granted, fall is a peak eventing season, but that doesn't detract from a very healthy assessment for the sport in the wild, wild West.

The best news for long-term growth of the sport is increasing entries at the Intro level, asserts Area VI chairman Bea DiGrazia. "We've seen a lot more growth in the last two years, more than most other areas, and it's especially exciting because we see it at the Intro level, which is a division that doesn't fill up nationally."

The proliferation of shows at all levels "definitely helps stimulate growth," Bea says. It's now more feasible, geographically, to get to more shows and there are more opportunities to step up, which fuels the industry. "If you want to go up a level, you may take a few more lessons, or get a horse that's capable of doing that."

Newly USEA-recognized events hosted by the Woodland Stallion Station, this past August and next March, and the Camelot Equestrian Park next summer, are more newcomer events expected to keep the positive participation trends going.

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Written by Kim F. Miller

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Novice Level Three Day events, like those hosted by Twin Rivers in Paso Robles, have given Intro riders a relatively new brass ring to shoot for. These are “classic” competitions that include roads and tracks and steeplechase, plus cross-country, on endurance day.

The gradually recovering economy has helped, too. And so has a variety of innovative competitions, like event derbies and clinic/show weekends, that have helped make the sport more inviting and accessible. The inaugural Pacific

Indoor Eventing Series Oct. 11 in San Juan Capistrano is the newest of that lot.



James and Taren Atkinson

The successful running of another inaugural event, the Copper Meadows CIC Three Star, in early September, is yet another indicator of the sport’s health in our region. Its existence reflects US Eventing’s push nationwide to make it easier for high performance riders to qualify and prepare for international competitions. Like most equestrian sports, more major competitions have traditionally been held on the East Coast. A run for the Olympics, WEG or Pan Am Games used to mean a relocation, a season spent back East or abroad or, at the very least, a few cross-country treks.

Speaking from his post as a US Eventing Association board member, the many-hatted James Atkinson explains, “We’ve been trying to set up each area throughout the country to have two CIC Three-Stars, leading up to a CCI Three Star, so that people have more opportunities to qualify.” Toward that end, Copper Meadows’ One- and Two- Stars in June helped people qualify for the Rebecca Farms CCI (Montana) Two Star this past July. Copper Meadows’ CIC Three Star helped people qualify for the Galway CCI Three Star Oct. 30-Nov. 2. (CCI courses are more difficult than CIC courses.)

“For the past few years, we’ve really been trying to make Area VI a viable place for people to compete and prepare their horses, rather than having to go back East,” James notes. “Now at Copper’s spring shows, for example, you can qualify any horse at any level. That’s pretty cool!” The growth of Area VI’s show calendar has to be carefully calibrated, James notes. “As the influx of competitors continues and we continue developing more venues, we have to be careful

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that there are enough competitors to make each event successful. On the Area VI council, we all work to be very aware of the demographics involved and to maintain that delicate balance.”

That’s especially important given how challenging it is to stage an eventing competition at any level. Just as the dressage tests, cross country and stadium courses get more difficult at the higher levels, so do the staging demands in terms of logistics and costs. “We don’t have organizers beating down our doors,” says James.

“Having the right facility and getting things going is quite a task.” But it’s worth it on two levels, explains James, a WEG and Pan Am Games rider for Canada, international course builder and event organizer with his wife and fellow eventer, Taren Atkinson.

In addition to helping international hopefuls, these riders’ participation helps overall enrollment. Most elite competitors have young horses and students campaigning at the lower levels, and the chance to see them in action is a great draw for participants and fans alike.

Mighty in Spirit

In terms of membership, Area VI, which includes California and Hawaii, holds a middle rank among the USEA’s 10 regions. Current membership is 1,262, approximately 10 percent of the association’s 12,000. Area 2, comprised of mid-

Atlantic states, has consistently been the biggest, with current membership at 2,465. What Area VI may lack in numbers is made up for in opportunity, enthusiasm and accomplishment. The region is home to many Olympians, 2008 individual Olympic silver medalist Gina Miles and Canadian WEG and Olympic rider Hawley Bennett-Awad among them. Both typify the willingness of our top riders to give back to the sport and help those hoping to follow in their footsteps. Gina is Area VI’s active athlete representative and Hawley coaches the Young Riders team.

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As for the future, several riders on the USEF High Performance committee's watch-list hail from the Golden State: Matt Brown earned invites to the High Performance Training Sessions earlier this year, and the USEF's 2014 Developing Riders/ Eventing 25 included Helen Bouscaren, Cori Davis, Brynn Littlehale and Kimberly Steinbuch. Tiana Coudray, a student of Bea and Derek DiGrazia, is a 2012 Olympian now based in Europe with designs on more international appearances for the U.S. Bea is hard pressed to isolate one priority for Area VI going forward because there are many!

Our region's Young Rider teams have long been a threat at the North American Young Rider Championship, and sending riders to that podium is only one of that program's goals. Education is equally important and clinics and camps can easily fill that age group's agenda. There's an equal emphasis on those subjects for adults, along with revamping Area VI's website to improve communication with all members. The embrace of various USEA educational programs is pumping Area VI professional into the national pipeline, too, with certified instructors, course designers, judges and technical delegates. "Those are all concerns for us and whenever you put energy into one of those things, it helps with the other categories."

Bea is excited about the growth of eventing specific breeding programs in the West. Sunsprite Warmbloods, Dragonfire Farm, Graceland Equestrian and Kings Way Farm are a few great examples. "They are really doing a great job of producing future event horses, and we are seeing more people thinking about bloodlines and what pairings are really working. We are way behind the Germans and our Irish, but we are making progress."

She's also excited about the second West Coast Instructors Certification Program (ICP) symposium, set for Jan. 16 at Galway Downs and as part of the weekend that will include the area's Awards Banquet. Volunteerism is one area where Bea has some worries. "There are periods of time when we are way overtaxing our volunteers," she notes. "It's a huge undertaking to be part of the Area VI council, but it's a great job with really good people. Some of the best professionals in the nation are part of the team that runs Area VI and there's a great opportunity to work with them."

Lack of experience is no reason to sit on the sidelines when it comes to volunteering, Bea encourages. "Every single event in our area offers an inroad to getting involved. Contact the organizer or the council member. They will have a job for you!" There are some great incentives to do so. At Copper Meadows, "Copper Bucks" can be applied to fees for competitions and/or clinics, a program that's helped keep the venue's full-slate of events well staffed year-round.

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Spectatorship is a perennial next hurdle for eventing. It will help top riders get the sponsorship they need to defray costs and bring more participants into the sport. If viewership for two Ride On Videos of the September Copper Meadows event are an indicator, there's good news on that front, too. Hosted by Frankie Thieriot (see story, page 20) the first video, of dressage and show jumping, had 75,000 views. The second, featuring cross-country, logged 50,000, and that was the tally just a few days after the event. "That is really significant and really good for our sport and our sponsors that so many people were checking it out," says James.

For more information and events and opportunities in Area VI, visit www.areavi.org. The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at kimfmiller1@mac.com or 949-644-2165.