

the little team THAT CO

“THE COLLEGE DIDN’T OWN A SINGLE horse. We didn’t have one bridle, one brush, or even a can of fly spray.”

That’s Gary Reynolds, describing how things were in May 2006, when he was hired as head coach of the brand-new women’s varsity equestrian team at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. When classes began three months later, Reynolds had canvassed the campus and rounded up a squad of nearly 20 riders (Western and hunt seat), and acquired the team’s first donated horse.

“That first summer,” recalls the 51-year-old coach, “I spent my time gathering supplies, finding out as much as I could about the sport, and learning the NCAA rules. In the fall, we just started right up. Most of the Western team members were freshmen, and all were walk-ons, except one recruited rider who transferred from Georgia.”

Reynolds, a longtime national and international judge for several large breed registries, was tapped for the job after having served as the director of amateur events and assistant director of shows for the AQHA. The lifelong horseman and animal-business graduate of Texas Tech University had also managed an equestrian show facility.

Although he knew it would be a huge challenge to start a varsity team from the ground up, Reynolds welcomed the opportunity to serve as the initial architect of the TCU team. So he moved his family to Fort Worth and got busy, arranging to lease horses for the team on a pay-per-ride basis from nearby Fieldstone Park Stable. Then, he and his newly formed team began a journey that took them from newly organized to national champions in just 19 months.

A LEARNING SEASON

In that inaugural 2006 season, Reynolds had only nine Western riders, several of whom had been multiple world cham-

pions in various disciplines. Still, due to a few complicated NCAA policies, only one of those elite-level riders was eligible to compete during the fall semester.

The team’s overall inexperience (and the fact that TCU had no experienced horsemanship or reining horses to practice on) resulted in a winless autumn. But by the spring semester, the TCU Western team had five former world champions eligible to

compete, along with their teammates who’d benefited from the first four months of on-the-job learning.

The Western squad’s increased strength led to its first-ever victory against Fresno State in early 2007. A month later, they beat the highly ranked Auburn University.

Reynolds says the wins were a thrill, although the Western team’s eventual 4-7 record seeded them 10th (of 12) going into the Varsity Equestrian National Championships (VENC)—where TCU was defeated in the first round. But Reynolds used the team’s remaining time at the VENC as a learning lab.

During regular competition, host teams provide horses for the riders. At the VENC, to ensure a wide

range of quality horses to be used for the three-day competition, each team is encouraged to bring several top-performing horses from their strings.

“We prepped the horses we’d brought for the other teams,” Reynolds says, “and that was a real growing process for my riders—to observe the other teams competing on our horses. They learned so much about what we needed to do to be competitive in this sport. For my group of world champions to just sit there and not be able to ride really galvanized their determination to win the next year’s national championship.”

ON TARGET

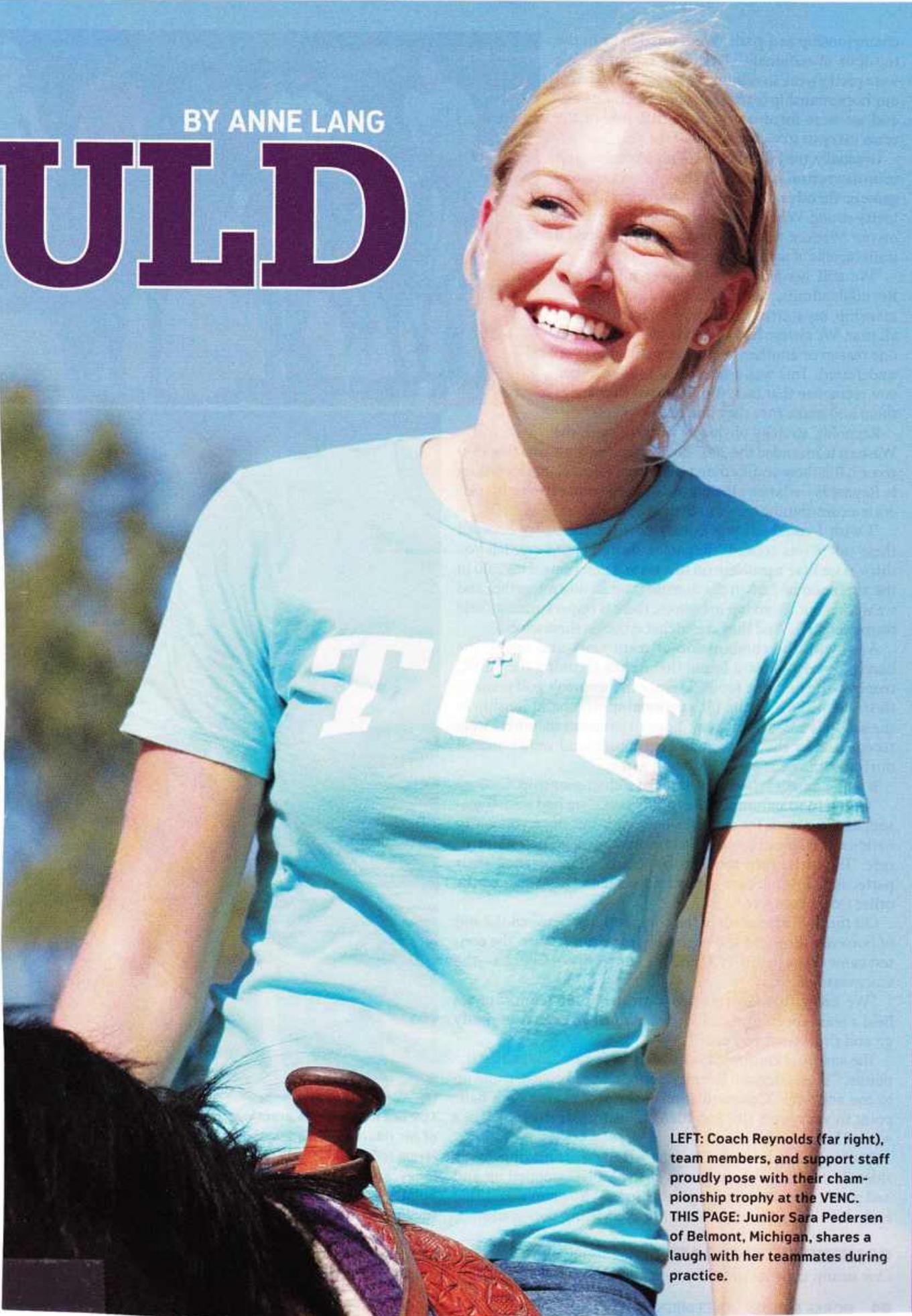
The 2007-2008 team (whose 12 members now included eight former world champions) began the season with the national



Last spring, new-to-the-game Texas Christian University jumped up and won the Western riding title at the Varsity Equestrian National Championships. This school year, they’re looking for more of the same.

BY ANNE LANG

WILD



LEFT: Coach Reynolds (far right), team members, and support staff proudly pose with their championship trophy at the VENC. THIS PAGE: Junior Sara Pedersen of Belmont, Michigan, shares a laugh with her teammates during practice.

championship as a goal. "We wanted to be in the top four at nationals," Reynolds explains. "We were pretty weak in reining, so we set out to make our horsemanship team as strong as it could be—and we were fortunate to have that side of the team carry us to victory most of the year."

Gradually, the full potential of his second-season team dawned on Reynolds. "When you win an away game on the other team's horses," he remarks, "that's pretty strong. When we read the judges' comments on our Western riders, I started to realize I had a team capable of winning nationals."

"We still needed to get stronger in reining," Reynolds admits, "and gradually we did. In horsemanship, my starting line-up was never the same all year. We always had someone who was out for one reason or another, yet we were still able to go undefeated. This was a true dream team. When you recognize that fact, you just need to manage them and make sure they don't peak too early."

Reynolds' strategy obviously worked, since the Western team ended the 2007-2008 season with an amazing 15-0 record. But those results didn't stem from talent alone, according to Reynolds—who says the unusually tight bond between his riders is a contributing factor to their overall success.

"I wish I could tell you exactly how the chemistry between these riders was created," Reynolds shrugs, "but I can tell you this—if we have a problem on this team, I don't care if it's 2:00 in the afternoon or 2:00 in the morning, we sit down together and we work it out. From top to bottom, there is respect among these team members. And they create that amongst themselves."

And, with the combination of team work and talent, the barely 2-year-old team found themselves claiming the VENC trophy—the first one for TCU since the women's golf team title in 1983, and only the 15th national sports championship in the school's 135-year history. Equestrian team members were recognized by the Texas State Legislature, and were honored during halftime at a TCU football game.

It was a hard-earned, nail-biter of a championship.

"Going in to nationals," Reynolds says, "we had a 12-0 season, and we were the number-one seed. But once you get to nationals, it doesn't matter who's first—you've just gotta go ride. The girls were total professionals. They learned their patterns, they took care of their horses, and they watched the other riders compete."

On the final afternoon of the competition—between the end of horsemanship and the beginning of reining, when the contest came down to just TCU and the University of Georgia—the score was tied.

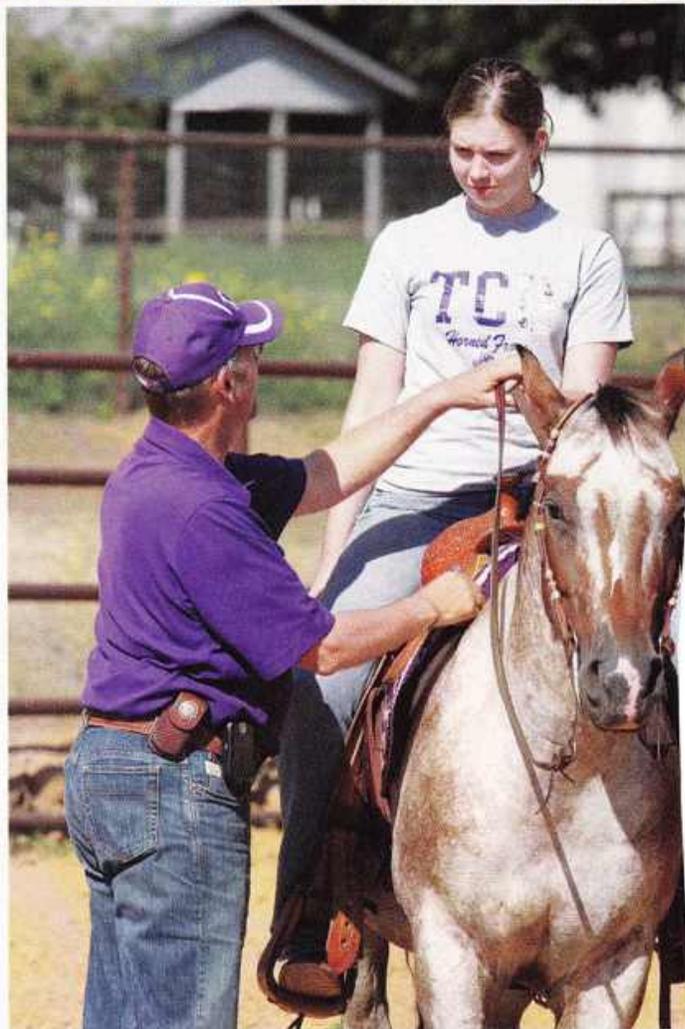
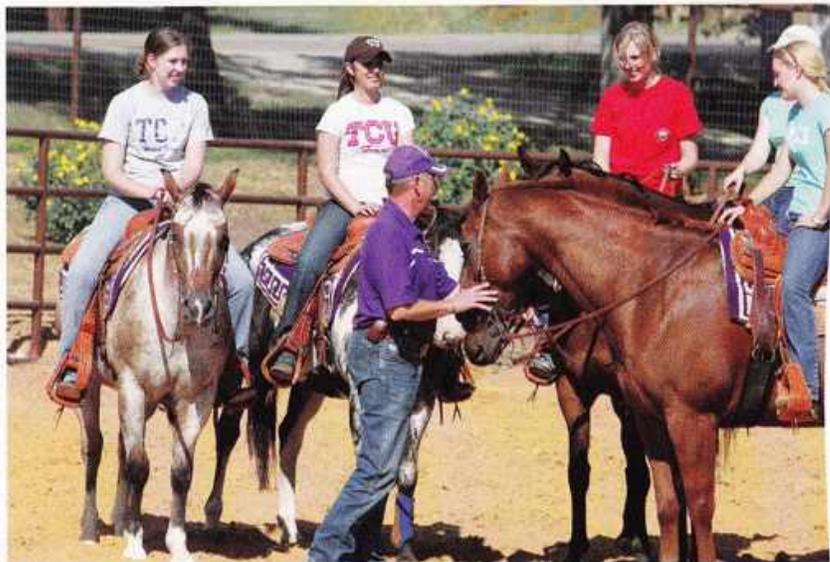
"We knew that Georgia has a great reining team. But we held a team meeting, and I said, 'Let's just go ride. Everybody go and show what you can.'"

The suspense continued, while stewards carefully tallied the points. "Then, Meghan Boenig, Georgia's head coach, came up to me and said: 'Congratulations—the score came up a half-point in your favor [1027 to 1026.5].'" Reynolds smiles. "That's when I knew we'd truly won."

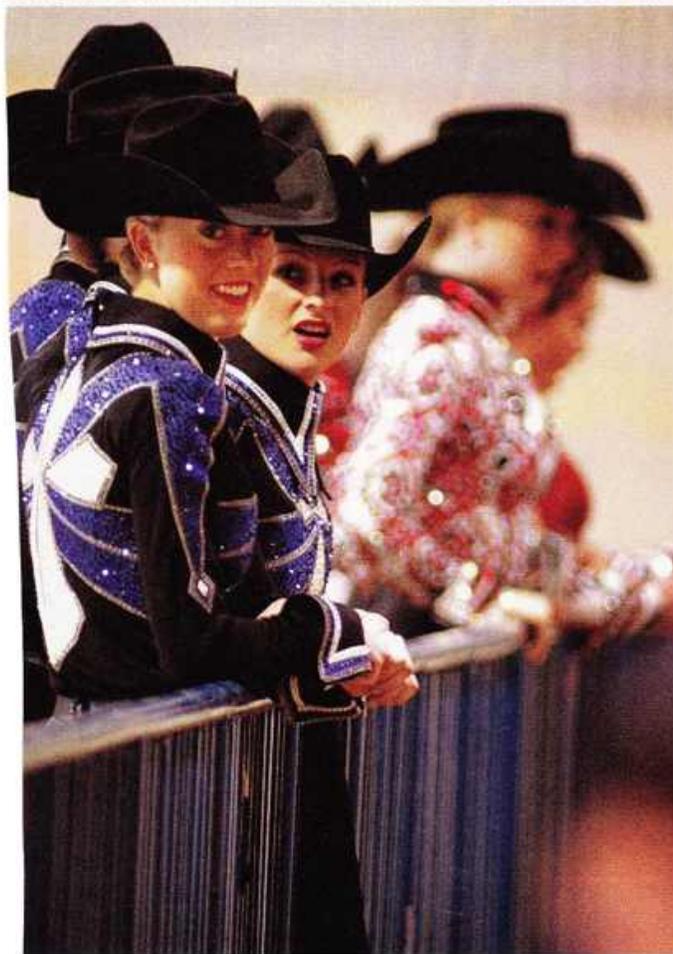
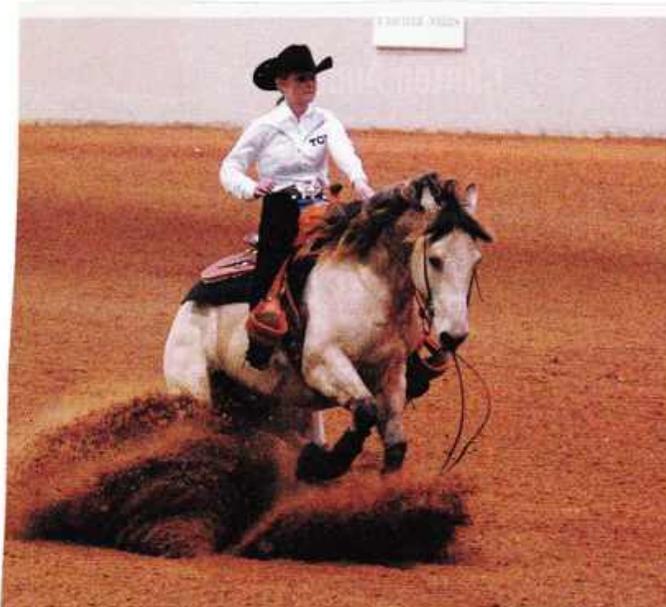
Looking back, he says, "The whole thing was amazing. Every rider during those three games at the VENC stepped up and had personal bests. It was a great match—two great teams that each did a fantastic job of showing everything they could."

CONTINUING THEIR LEGACY

One sunny, early-autumn day, just a week into the 2008 fall se-



TOP LEFT: At a home practice, Coach Reynolds and a group of his riders discuss strategies for an upcoming competition. (From left: Kelly Morris, Jennifer Neel, Ashley Aikman, Sally Dulaney, and Sara Pedersen.) **ABOVE LEFT:** Reynolds shares some pointers with sophomore Kelly Morris. **TOP RIGHT:** The final reining competition at the VENC gave the advantage to TCU. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Three members of the TCU horsemanship team watch on the rail at the VENC. (For more information on varsity equestrian sports, go to varsityequestrian.com.)



mester, Reynolds is supervising a Western team practice involving a half-dozen riders who are busily rotating a stream of horses in and out of the barn, and trading mounts between rides.

"Today," Reynolds explains, "we're mostly focused on getting the horses back into shape after they've been turned out all summer."

Unlike their equine partners, most team members haven't taken the past three months off. Many compete in horse shows in their respective home regions during the summer. And although it's not mandatory, student athletes are urged to stay in top physi-

cal shape during the off-season by putting in intensive workouts similar to those required when the team's competing.

Three times a week during the school year, beginning at 6:30 a.m., team members undergo strength and conditioning exercises supervised by sports trainers from the TCU athletic department. The riders also go on regular cross-country runs, in addition to riding four to five times per week.

"Each year, we consult with the strength coaches to make sure they're developing a rider-athlete; that they're not developing leg muscles that make it impossible to zip up a rider's chaps or fit into tall boots. Instead, the trainers are beginning to understand how to develop core strength as it relates to our sport," Reynolds says.

The normally affable Reynolds is a different sort of coach when it comes to enforcing fitness away from the barn. He views tardiness or unexcused absences from workouts as a major offense, and deals with them accordingly.

"If you're tardy or miss one workout, you'll do 100 up-downs," Reynolds declares. (For the uninitiated: An up-down consists of a floor push-up that's immediately followed by a leap to full standing position.) "If you miss two workouts," Reynolds goes on, "the team does 100 up-downs with you. Miss three workouts, and the team does 100 up-downs while you watch."

In this 2008-2009 season, the TCU Varsity Equestrian Team includes 23 riders—11 of whom compete in the Western events of horsemanship and reining. Twelve riders compete in the hunt seat events of equitation over fences and equitation on the flat, guided by assistant coach Haley O'Neal.

Most of the recruited members on both teams receive some level of scholarship funding. On TCU's Western side, there are three freshmen this season. From last year's six-member VENC team, two riders have completed their NCAA eligibility—so just four of those championship riders remain on the team.

"Every rider on my Western team is a multiple world champion (from the realms of AQHA, APHA, NRHA, ApHC, etc.)," Reynolds states. "And these riders have been coached to the highest level, so there's virtually not much I can tell them that they haven't already heard at some point."

He confesses that having all this talent on the team makes it difficult to choose who will participate in competitions, which total more than a dozen each year, from September through April.

"All year," says Reynolds, "we walk a fine line between wanting to give as much experience as we can to as many riders as we can, while trying to ensure that we've got enough of our seasoned starters on the roster that we can win the game."

While the team has set a second VENC title as their 2008-2009 goal, Reynolds says that regardless of how everything shakes out this season, he counts himself among folks who are grateful to be immersed in truly rewarding work.

"I can always look at parents of recruits and say, 'This is a group of women you'd want your daughter to be with—they're serious about their grades and about what they do. They're athletic and in shape, and they're just a great peer group.' Their experience on the equestrian team, and at TCU, has a huge influence on what they'll be able to contribute to society.

"I couldn't be more proud to be their coach." ■



To meet members from TCU's team, brush up on current varsity equestrian competition formats, and learn how you can get recruited by a varsity team, go to HorseandRider.com this month. Plus, check out our slide show for fun photos of TCU's varsity riders, and learn about H&R's cool connections to the team.