



The squad from Baylor University, including (from left) assistant coach Stacy Sanderson, Ashley Ann McGehee, Lisa Goldman, Kim Woodsum, Samantha Schaefer, Taylor Brown and head coach Ellen White posed with USEF steward Larry Alcorn after their first NCEA Championship win.

Baylor Breaks Into The Big Time At NCEA Championships

The fourth-seeded hometown team claims its first national hunter seat title.

BY ANNE LANG

On April 14, toward the end of the last round of hunter seat competition at the three-day National Collegiate Equestrian Association National Championships in Waco, Texas, it came down to the wire for finalists Baylor University (Texas) and Texas A&M University.

Earlier that day, the two teams had tied 2-2 in the flat phase. With just one round remaining in the over fences phase, the score was 2-1 in TAMU's favor. If the two teams tied again, the NCEA hunter seat championship would go to the squad with the highest raw scores for flat and over fences combined.

So when Baylor freshman Samantha Schaefer went in and calmly laid down a smooth round that earned her the winning point from judges' scores of 87 and 86, a large section of the jam-packed

stands at the Extraco Events Center erupted in deafening cheers: No. 4 seed Baylor had nabbed the national crown in a raw-score decision of 1,192-1,070 over No. 7 seed TAMU.

Knowing that the team championship rested on her shoulders hadn't rattled the young woman from Westminster, Md. She was one of the nation's most decorated junior riders, having won or placed in the top four of the most elite equitation finals.

"I didn't necessarily feel pressure when I went in the ring," said Schaefer, 18. "I'd done well so far, and I wanted to keep that going. I knew I could do it, and the team knew I could do it, which made it exciting. But as far as going last and having that type of pressure, I'm pretty much used to that."

It was a week of upsets, as defending

hunter seat champion and No. 1 seed Auburn University (Ala.) finished fourth this year, just ahead of No. 2 seed University of South Carolina. TAMU's reserve championship on the hunter seat side, added to the western championship they also won that day, resulted in an overall NCEA National Championship.

Third in hunter seat (and reserve champion overall) was No. 3 seed University of Georgia. Baylor ended up third overall, while Oklahoma State University was reserve champion in western.

This marked the first time that Baylor finished in the top three in any category of the varsity equestrian year-end championships since the competition began in 2002. On their way to this year's hunter seat finals, Baylor beat No. 5 seed Southern Methodist University (Texas) 7-1 in the quarterfinals, giving up just 1 point over fences. In the next day's semifinals, Baylor riders bested Auburn's in a close 4-3-1 decision.

Then it was on to the last match-up against TAMU. Despite their No. 7 ranking in the initial brackets, they advanced to the finals by beating Fresno State University (Calif.), USC and UGA, scoring 6-2 in all three face-offs.

"It's interesting, because we've always been very strong in flat," said Baylor Head Coach Ellen White. "But these last few days, we went into fences and won there, too. Our fences riders just rode stellar. They nailed it and won nearly every point, which we had to do."

White's winning formula included using the same five riders (out of Baylor's 50-member hunter seat roster) for all three days. Most varsity coaches rotate various riders in and out of their respective lineups at Nationals, but White stuck to Taylor Brown (flat/fences) of Palmyra, Va; Lisa Goldman (flat/fences) of Hawthorn Woods, Ill.; Ashley Ann McGehee (fences) of Jacksonville, Fla.; Schaefer (flat/fences); and Kim Woodsum (flat) of Arlington, Texas.

"But today," White continued, "we just had uncharacteristic mistakes on the flat, such as missing leads or not holding a counter-canter. It was a difficult finals test, but we should have been more up to the challenge. I think the riders just had some nerves today."

Gaining A Team Mindset

Schaefer, who was named overall MVP in the over fences (for her 3-0 record that earned single judges' scores ranging from 86-90), is the newest member of the Baylor hunter seat team. Having deferred college until second semester in order to compete fulltime last fall (which marked the end of her junior career), Schaefer arrived in January at Baylor ready to study and ride—only to discover that some of her online high school classes weren't immediately approved by the National Collegiate Athletic Association, which governs the 18 Division I and five Division II teams in the varsity equestrian network.

"Samantha's computer courses meant that it took a long time to get her approved," said White, "which was very frustrating for her. So every weekend when she'd go off to a horse show, I'd think: 'Oh no, I hope she comes back!' When the NCAA finally cleared her to ride in March, we were so relieved. That was three days before the Texas A&M meet [during the regular season], and she laid down a 90 and was MVP. She also was MVP at the Big 12 Championships and MVP here. It's great for varsity equestrian to have her on a team."

NCEA NATIONAL HUNTER SEAT CHAMPIONSHIPS Waco, Texas—Apr. 12-14

TEAM

1. BAYLOR UNIVERSITY

(Taylor Brown, Lisa Goldman, Ashley Ann McGehee, Samantha Schaefer & Kim Woodsum)

2. TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

(Marisa Bernal, Lia Chafee, Leah Chenelle, Haley Buchmiller, Maggie Earle, Kori Pickett, Elizabeth Dolch, Hannah Solbelman & Emily Williams)

3. UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

(Carly Anthony, Kylee Arbuckle, Olivia Dorey, Michelle Morris & Grace Rogers)

Also competed: 4. Auburn University (A. Becker, J. Delman, Q. Hayes, C. Lin, M. McAlary, L. Portela, G. Socha & J. Waxman); 5. University Of South Carolina (C. Curcio, K. Hart, C. Hedgepeth, A. Henter, E. Johnson, K. McCormack & K. Schmidt); 6. Kansas State University (C. Avoiese, M. Finch, L. Laffey, S. Mershon, M. Wayda, R. Webster & K. Yates); Southern Methodist University (J. Fischer, C. Line, J. Petterson, R. Reid, E. Roberts & M. Stover); New Mexico State University (L. Bostwick, S. Gershon, R. Jenkins, A. Lang, E. McConnell, B. Raab, B. Solomon & H. Swarthout); Texas Christian University (C. Ader, V. Lee, E. Maloof, C. Selchau, D. Stiegler); California State University, Fresno (H. Elsbernd, K. Hewson-Budnik, L. Madrazo, N. Roworth, C. Rua-Stone, K. Spicer, H. West & M. Wilson); Oklahoma State University (S. Elser, S. Gesick, S. Harrison, A. Joyce, A. Rose, E. Sparks & J. White); University Of Tennessee-Martin (K. Bergenty, C. Cramer, K. Miranda, H. Halston, R. Rickett & M. Van Selus).



The newest addition to Baylor's squad, equitation veteran Samantha Schaefer, led her team to victory and earned the over fences MVP title.

For her part, Schaefer is adjusting to the switch from riding as an individual to riding as a team player. "I still sort of think like an individual," she said. "You're doing the best you can do, to the best of your ability. Then anything that happens from there is out of your control. I try not to think about the 70 girls sitting

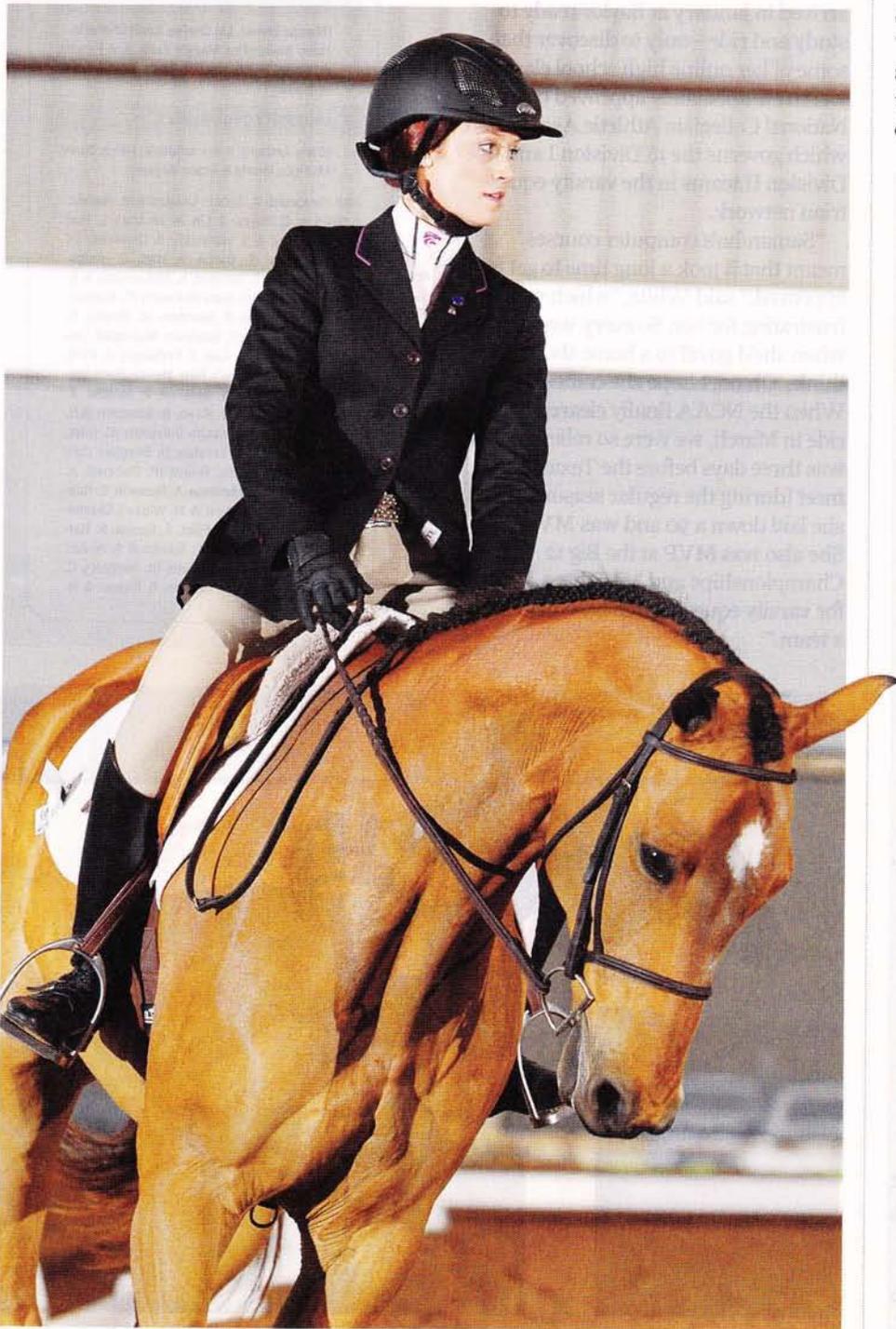
on the bench who are counting on me, because it's too much to think about. You just do what you can do, and the rest will fall into place."

White was grateful for Schaefer's years of top-level experience, especially at Nationals. "There we were with our little freshman," she said, "right at the end,

and we needed the point to win. But that kid can ride under pressure! She must have ice water in her veins. She looks at the course, says, 'I've got this,' and vroom! Off she goes."

Schaefer's progress toward a team mentality was evident in her assessment of Nationals week.

"On the first day, we swept flat," said Schaefer, a business/marketing major, "which was a great confidence booster, and we did well in jumping that day, too. On Friday, we maybe got a little too confident going into flat and came out 1 to



Meredith Finch of Kansas State University was named MVP overall on the flat and helped her team to sixth place.

NCEA Names 2011-12 All-Americans

For the second consecutive year, the NCEA Selection Committee honored the top equestrian athletes in each of the respective varsity events. All-American Awards in equitation over fences went to Lisa Goldman, Baylor; Maggie McAlary, Auburn; Emma Roberts, SMU; and Katherine Schmidt, USC. All-American Awards in Equitation on the Flat went to Carly Anthony, UGA; Taylor Brown, Baylor; McAlary, Auburn; and Macy Wilson, Fresno State.

All-American Honorable Mentions in over fences were awarded to Kara Bergenty, University of Tennessee-Martin; Lia Chafee, TAMU; Carolyn Curcio, USC; Amber Henter, USC; Amy Lang, New Mexico State University; Emily McConnell, NMSU; Sarah Mershon, KSU; Michelle Morris, UGA; Abby O'Mara, UGA; and Jennifer Waxman, Auburn.

All-American Honorable Mentions in flat went to Kylee Arbuckle, UGA; Jennifer Delman, Auburn; Stephanie Gershon, NMSU; Goldman, Baylor; Kimberly Hewson-Budnik, FSU; Ruby Jenkins, NMSU; Larissa Laffey, KSU; Kimberly McCormack, USC; Michelle Morris, UGA; Kaitlin Perry, TCU; Katherine Schmidt, USC; Hannah Soibelman, TAMU; and Jordan White, OSU.

TIDBITS

► The NCEA format calls for 12 qualifying teams from NCAA Division I to compete in each discipline, with head-to-head hunter seat rounds from a four-man team in each equitation over fences bracket, and four-man teams in each equitation on the flat bracket. Horses are loaned to VENC by participating colleges and outside individuals. Teams draw for their mounts, and riders have only a few minutes to warm up on those horses before entering the ring to compete.

► Five riders earned single scores of 90 or higher at the NCEA Championships this year: Maggie Earle, TAMU; Samantha Harrison, OSU; Kimberly McCormack, USC; Samantha Schaefer, Baylor; and Jennifer Waxman, Auburn.

► **MEREDITH FINCH** of Kansas State University was named MVP overall on the flat. The junior from Somerville, Ohio, won all four of her rounds, with double scores of 149-138 against Texas Christian University, 162-141 against Auburn, 150-122 against SMU and 159-137 against USC.

Finch said the award came as “a complete shock, honestly. By the end of the week, I was happy with everything that had happened. But when they called my name for MVP, I had no idea.”

“Meredith was the first flat rider to enter the ring at Nationals, and she set the bar right there and never looked back,” said KSU head coach Casey Finnell. “Over the past couple of years, she’s had an unfortunate string of bad luck with injuries and illnesses, which has been a frustrating path for her. But she’s turned the corner and is learning to focus on showing off what she can and allowing the horse to do the same. That’s been a huge reason for her success. We’re so excited for her and proud.”

KSU finished the hunter seat competition in sixth place out of 12 teams.

“We’ve always been a good team, but now everyone knows that we’re a great team.”

—SAMANTHA SCHAEFER

3. Then we sat down and said, ‘Let’s back up a second. We’ve come this far; let’s not let this go.’ Then we had one tie and won our other three jumping points. That was great. It all came back to us and put the wind back in our sails. We knew it was possible to win this.”

In the warm-up ring for the final round, Schaefer took stock of her mount. She knew she was a quiet horse, and that she just needed a little help in balancing. “I tried to find a happy medium where she was round but without her head too high,” she explained.

Bobby Murphy designed the course, which included more long, bending lines than rollbacks. Had Schaefer gone earlier in the round, she said she would have taken an inside turn to gain an edge on her competition. “But [after the rest of the horses jumped], I knew I only needed an 82 or 83 average,” she said. “So I decided to just go for a smooth round, to keep the rhythm going. I landed off the last jump and had a confident feeling.

“This week has been exciting,” Schaefer concluded. “Winning not only helps boost the confidence and spirits of the riders who competed, but the rest of the team, too. We’ve always been a good team, but now everyone knows that we’re a great team.”

Buoyed By Support

Another significant contributor to the Baylor team was Taylor Brown, a junior majoring in forensic science who won the individual flat phase at the Collegiate

Equitation Challenge at the FTI Winter Equestrian Festival (Fla.) in February. At this year’s NCEA championships, Brown rode in all three flat rounds and all three over fences rounds for a perfect 3-0 record in each phase.

“Taylor had been in a little bit of a slump during the regular season,” White said. “As brilliantly as she rides, she can also have a confidence issue in a snap. So I had to pull her up this week and say: ‘C’mon, this is it! Time to peak; let’s get going.’ And she rode to great scores, nailing everything.”

In her final flat round, Brown was going up against a 0 score from a TAMU rider who’d gone off-pattern. But that didn’t ease her nerves much.

“I was just telling myself: ‘Please don’t go off-pattern, please don’t go off-pattern,’” Brown said. “But the horse was a great draw. She knew how to do everything, but she was tired. I tend to put horses to sleep, so to get them a little more spunked up is harder for me. I had big spurs on, and I needed lots of leg. I lost her in a couple of spots like the leg yields, and I needed a bit more momentum, but it was a pretty solid pattern.”

Over fences later that day, Brown rode second on a horse that exhibited excessive energy with its TAMU rider. “But as I said, I’m good at putting horses to sleep,” Brown explained. “At least I knew I had that going for me. He was perfect in the warm-up; I felt like he was right there for me. I had a tough year this year in jumping; I definitely wasn’t riding at my best. But I pulled it out here and got my confidence back in jumping, for sure.”

Helping to boost that confidence, said Brown, was “the team support. It was huge. Everyone was supporting us: the girls in the back, the girls in the stands, parents, coaches, fans. I’ve never seen our team unity so strong.”

White agreed, especially when it came to the semifinals. “While I didn’t like the idea that we were 1-3 with Auburn going into fences,” she recalled, “the team said: ‘We need each other. We need everybody to get their point.’ They lifted each other up, and that was a turning point for our team. It wasn’t like: ‘You better get this point!’ It was more like: ‘We love you and we support you, and we know you can do this.’ They rose to the occasion, and they soared.” ●