



Auburn University Tigers Strut Their Stripes At VENC

The southern school nabs both the hunter seat and overall titles at the Varsity Equestrian National Championships.

Anne Lang

MAYBE IT WAS because Anna Schierholz donned the socks she's worn annually since her team last won the hunter seat title three years ago. Perhaps it was because Maggie McAlary methodically gave her wristwatch to her mother to hold each time she entered the ring. Or possibly it was due to the team's hearty pre-finals dinner that included fried chicken, meatballs and macaroni and cheese.

Good-luck rituals aside, Auburn University (Ala.) drew upon the strengths and skills of its riders to win both the

hunter seat bracket and overall title (combined English and western squads) at the Varsity Equestrian National Championships on April 16 in Waco, Texas, catapulting them to the top of the 18 Division I equestrian teams in the National Collegiate Athletic Association. The hunter seat reserve championship (and overall reserve championship) went to the University of Georgia. Baylor University (Texas) claimed third place in the hunter seat bracket.

Afterward, back at her team's barn aisle, Auburn associate



(WillieGomezPhotos.com Photo)

Auburn University overall winners at the VENC included: (back row, from left) head coach Greg Williams, associate coach Lindsay Neubarth, Christine Orrison, Mallory Kolpin, Elise Fraza, Taylor Cechini, Addison Snively, Rachel Cooper, Bailey Kleis, Coryn Bergenty, Quincey Hayes, Piper Donnelly, Carmanne Matherne, assistant coach Lisa Helfer and (front row, from left) Terra Schroeder of USEF, Lindsay Portela, Grace Socha, Maggie McAlary, Anna Becker, Dottie Grubb, Anna Schierholz, Christina Lin and Jennifer Waxman.



Grace Socha earned the VENC's MVP over fences title as she helped lead Auburn University to their second national championships.

As students began warming up horses for the fences phase in the Extraco Event Center's indoor arena, the stands quickly filled to capacity. Emotions ran high as fight songs blared on the P.A. system, and school cheers were chanted at top volume.

Finally, the first rider (Anthony) entered the ring and laid down a smooth trip that earned a score of 85 from judge Sue Ashe and 77 from judge Carolyn Vincent, for a total of 162. But four rounds later, Anthony's head-to-head opponent, Socha of Auburn, topped the ride with a score of 165.

"What really made the difference was their poise, their control and their ability to handle the pressure."

—Lindsay Neubarth

Second in the ring was McAlary, whose mount faltered in a few places, and the judges responded with a score of 157.

"It was a tough horse," Neubarth observed. "Maggie had to ride every stride and every jump. She couldn't let her guard down for a second, and the key was just to keep going forward." McAlary's opponent was Kacy Jenkins of UGA, who suffered several refusals on the same horse, resulting in no score.

Rounding out the fences phase was UGA's O'Mara, whose judges' tally of 165 placed her 1 point ahead of Auburn's Dottie Grubb. O'Mara's round put UGA's sole fences point on the board, as Auburn's Schierholz defeated UGA's Morris 161-110 to complete the bracket—and seal the hunter seat win.

NCAA VARSITY EQUESTRIAN NATIONAL HUNT SEAT CHAMPIONSHIPS

Waco, Texas—Apr. 14-16

TEAM

1. AUBURN UNIVERSITY
(Lindsay Portela, Maggie McAlary, Grace Socha, Christina Lin, Dottie Grubb, Anna Schierholz, Jennifer Waxman & Anna Becker)
2. UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
(Carly Anthony, Grace Rogers, Michelle Morris, Abby O'Mara & Kacy Jenkins)
3. BAYLOR UNIVERSITY
(Kendra Vicary, Kim Woodsum, Lisa Goldman, Taylor Brown, Ashley McGehee & Kara Fergusson)

Also competed: 4. Oklahoma State University (J. White, A. White, E. Sparks, A. Rose, S. Elser & E. Prutow); 5. University Of South Carolina (C. Curcio, K. McCormack, V. Middleton, C. Hedgepeth, P. Dekko, A. Arute, M. Hale & K. Hart); 6. Texas A&M University (K. Bell, E. Solch, L. Chafee, H. Soibelman, K. Pickett, E. Williams, B. Coleman & M. Earle); University Of Tennessee, Martin (C. Cramer, K. Bergenty, K. Abell, K. Gay, B. Kasprack, T. Eford, K. Miranda); Texas Christian University (J. Hagen, T. Munroe, M. Trimino, H. Jacobi, V. Lee, T. Frederick, C. Ader, C. Selchau & J. Whitt); New Mexico State University (B. Raab, E. Daniels, S. Gershon, C. Keyes, E. McConnell & A. Lang); California State University, Fresno (J. Kissell, C. Marshall, L. Carr, K. Steinbuch, H. West, K. Budnik, C. Stone & H. Elsbernd); Kansas State University (R. Webster, L. Laffey, M. Finch, S. Patterson, C. Avolese, S. Mershon, K. Yates & S. Barnett); Delaware State University (K. Blair, E. Tuttle, A. Butler, C. Foltz & A. Hotz).



(Willie Gomez/Photos.com Photo)

head coach Lindsay Neubarth was celebrating with her jubilant riders. The scene was awash in a sea of orange and blue as giddy Tigers fans, friends and relatives converged on the athletes.

"Our [No. 1 seed] hunter seat team had a 15-1 record for the year," said a smiling Neubarth, "and we just came off winning the Southeastern Conference championship. It helped to follow that win and to luck out on drawing horses that matched the right riders so that they were able to perform beautifully on them."

Newbarth also credited team unity as a significant contributor to Auburn's performance. "They really just chose to come together as a team," she explained, "both hunter seat and western. What really made the difference was their poise, their control and their ability to handle the pressure—this year more than any other previous year. They don't get rattled, whether it's the SEC championships or walking into Nationals. They dust off their boots, and they're ready to go."

But the Auburn Tigers' road to victory involved facing off against their most formidable foe. They advanced to the championship rounds (flat and fences) to meet the UGA Bulldogs, whose hunter seat team won the title the past two years, for a total of five times since the championships began in 2002. (Auburn won the hunter seat title in 2008.) UGA's riders were not only looking to defend their VENC crown, but also to avenge their loss to Auburn in the SEC championships.

VENC finals day began with the flat phase, with Christina Lin, McAlary, Lindsay Portela and Grace Socha representing Auburn. UGA flat riders were Carly Anthony, Michelle Morris, Abby O'Mara and Grace Rogers. Following each rider's execution of a difficult test on unfamiliar horses, Auburn was ahead by 3 points (Lin, McAlary and Portela), with Morris having scored the lone point for the Bulldogs.



All-American Honors

This year, the separate competition for top-ranked individual riders was replaced with All-American Awards. The Varsity Equestrian Selection Committee awarded the top four athletes in each of the respective VE events (equitation over fences and equitation on the flat in hunter seat, and horsemanship and reining on the western side).

All-American Honors Status in equitation over fences went to Carly Anthony (UGA), Maggie McAlary (Auburn), Abby O'Mara (UGA) and Jordyn Pettersen (Southern Methodist University). All-American Honors Status in equitation on the flat was awarded to Anthony, McAlary, Michelle Morris (UGA) and Lindsay Portela (Auburn).



(WillieGomezPhotos.com Photo)

Maggie McAlary won the MVP on the flat award as she contributed to Auburn University's overall title.

But Boenig was proud that, right from the beginning, her team showed Auburn that they were going to go for it. "[We] really forced their hand," she said. "It was a lot of fun and very exciting. My riders are great competitors and great sportsmen."

Neubarth acknowledged that Auburn's riders had a number of elements working in their favor. "We had some good draws," she said, "and we had some consistency. And for the first time in four years, our western team advanced to the semi-finals—which meant we had a chance at the overall national championship. Their success gave everyone a big, excited burst of energy and was the catalyst to get everything rolling. Both sides worked together to keep advancing."

The Auburn hunter seat team will lose a pair of graduating seniors this spring: Grubb, 22, an English major from Wellington, Fla.; and Schierholz, 21, a journalism major from St. Louis, Mo. Grubb has accepted a position with a clothing company close to home in West Palm Beach, while Schierholz hopes to land a job in sports media (having gained experience in that realm with Auburn Athletics).

"I think everyone on our team rode impeccably," Grubb said, "and rode to win every single point. Some people ride to get a good score, but when you compete head-to-head in these events, you really have to ride to win your point. And you don't want to go for a score that's out of your horse's range. Everyone on our team focused tremendously on beating their opponents, and that really showed—we only lost 2 points in all three brackets we showed in. I'd say 22-2 is a pretty good record!"

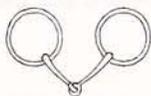
► Highs And Lows

After the finals were over, UGA head coach Meghan Boenig analyzed Jenkins' championship round. Earlier in the week Jenkins had handily won her fences rounds against Baylor and the University of Tennessee at Martin.

"Kacy's draw was a very, very nice horse," Boenig acknowledged, "but he was tired. It was Day 3, and there just wasn't quite enough spark there to make it through."

"Our riders rode very solidly and performed well," Boenig continued, "but they didn't have that little extra sparkle that Auburn had today. I think we were a little conservative in places in the flat. But in the fences, I'm really proud at how hard they went after things. They went for aggressive big turns. But some little things didn't work out, and unfortunately, those ended up costing big."

TIDBITS



- Maggie McAlary of Auburn University charted the highest single-round scores in the hunter seat disciplines. On the flat, McAlary scored a total of 187 points aboard Dawson, loaned by New Mexico State University. In fences, McAlary was awarded 182 points on Rita, loaned by UGA.
- The VENC 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/fences bracket, and four-man teams in each equitation/flat bracket. Horses are loaned to VENC by participating colleges and outside individuals. Teams draw for their head-to-head mounts, and riders have only a few minutes to warm up on those horses before entering the ring to compete.
- In a repeat of last year's VENC, Texas A&M won the western national championship, with Kansas State claiming reserve champion honors.



Schierholz recalled trying to get mentally prepared for the championship rounds. "Competing against Georgia is the hardest thing you can do," Schierholz admitted. "They're the toughest team out there. It was daunting just knowing the whole week that if we kept up our success, we were probably going to meet Georgia in the championship round. But we were more determined than we've ever been."

"This was my fourth year riding in the championship round," Schierholz added, "and I'd never felt so confident. We were all riding as one team. Our western girls were right behind us, and we were right behind them."

► Most Valuable Players

The Auburn team's profile was further elevated by the judges' awarding of MVPs to McAlary in equitation on the flat and Socha in equitation over fences. McAlary, a 21-year-old junior communications major from Amherst, N.H., was undefeated (6-0) at the VENC, winning on the flat against UGA, Oklahoma State University and Texas Christian University—and over fences against all three teams.

"I got really lucky with draws," said McAlary. "I had really sweet horses that were trying to do everything right, and I just kind of had to smooth them out. I tried to just calm down and have a confident ride so my horses would be confident too. I took my time and didn't let the patterns get ahead of me."

McAlary, who will compete on the European show circuit this summer, also lauded her teammates. "We have a great team energy," she said. "We're all like one big family, western and hunter seat. I want my teammates to win just as much as I want to win for myself, maybe even more. I'm more nervous when they're out there riding than I am myself, because this team means so much to every one of us."

"Our team as a whole laid out some incredible rides this week, and Maggie was no exception," said Neubarth. "She had some of the most beautiful and well-ridden patterns that I have ever seen in collegiate riding. It was awesome to watch."

Judge Ashe agreed, describing McAlary's flat rides as "absolutely beautiful, mind-bogglingly beautiful."

Socha (who ended up 3-1 at VENC) is a junior health promotion major from Glenville, N.Y. She won over fences against UGA and TCU and on the flat against OSU. Ashe said she started noticing Socha, 21, on the first day at the VENC. "She's a beautiful rider," Ashe declared, "and she is consistent."

"The entire support of the team helped me in every round," Socha said. "Knowing you have 34 girls cheering you on and supporting you is an unbelievable feeling, and I owe every bit of my success to each and every one of those girls."

Neubarth shared an anecdote that she feels typifies Socha's character: "Because we are a team sport and work together as a team all year long, we try to do the same thing at Nationals, which means some girls get taken out or switched around. In the second-round bracket, we told Grace we were letting freshman Jennifer Waxman ride over fences and that she would only be flatting in that round. Grace could've been mad or sad not to jump but instead was very excited that her teammate was getting the opportunity. As a coach, that's the attitude you love." 🐾

A Judge's Perspective

Sue Ashe, of Wellington, Fla., had never judged a VENC but found the caliber of riding "fantastic and unbelievable. I was so impressed with the whole thing," she said. "And this is such a great thing for these girls, because they've never been in a team situation for riding. The cheering and support between team members was absolutely fabulous. The teamwork among the VENC organizers and officials was amazing, and they put the whole thing together so beautifully."

Murphy Enjoys VENC Challenge

Bobby Murphy of Lexington, Ky., has designed courses for such prestigious events as the FTI Winter Equestrian Festival (Fla.) and the USHJA International Hunter Derby Finals (Ky.). He began designing the VENC jump courses in 2008.

"Varsity Equestrian has gone through a transition in the past four years, putting more of a focus on bringing in the top-level riders who have an amazing résumé in hunters, jumpers and equitation," he said. "The transition needed to be thought through, and group decisions needed to be made on how to effectively progress the level of difficulty in the course itself. This challenge was something that appealed to me."

Murphy views his challenge as "taking a group of horses and riders at all different levels and making them better without jeopardizing the meaning of their championship. Course designing is just one aspect of connecting the dots for this program. The bigger picture is the development of the future leaders of the horse industry. The way this industry has changed over the years has created a cause-and-effect that has downplayed the importance of horsemanship, sportsmanship and leadership. Varsity Equestrian is fixing a major problem in this industry right now."

In designing courses for the VENC, Murphy said: "I've used the ASPCA Maclay Finals from the National Horse Show as the building model. The style of jumps [at the VENC] plays a big role in developing the riders, the horses and the program. Only four years ago, we were using just normal hunter jumps, and now we have exactly the type of jumps you might see at the Maclay Finals. This also has greatly influenced the coaches to develop better jumps to use throughout the regular season of competition."

After watching riders negotiate his inaugural courses in 2008, Murphy recalled, "I discovered there were a lot of variables to think about. I couldn't just show up there and start setting a course; I needed to do my research before I got there. I knew I needed to get the coaches' viewpoints on what the horses and riders were capable of doing. This has been a learning process for me just as much as it has been for the program itself. And the more I can watch, the more I can learn—which helps me do what's best for the overall program."