

College Varsity Equestrian Teams Attract Legions Of Hopefuls

Growing numbers of young riders are striving to be recruited by prestigious NCAA-sanctioned squads.

Anne Lang

THE EIGHTH ANNUAL Varsity Equestrian National Championships held in Texas on April 16-18 provided, as usual, a dramatic showcase of some of the country's most talented young riders competing in a head-to-head format on unfamiliar mounts. (See VENC coverage in the May 15 issue.)

No single Varsity Equestrian event during the year offers a better display of what the burgeoning organization is all about than the VENC, which features the 12 top-seeded teams in Hunter Seat (equitation over fences and on the flat) and Western (horsemanship and reining).

Although most horse-world outsiders are unaware of Varsity Equestrian's status as an "emerging sport" within the National Collegiate Athletics Association, the realm is well-represented—specifically, by 18 colleges in the elite NCAA Division I category and five colleges in Division II.

Varsity Equestrian has long been a familiar entity in the hunter/jumper industry, dating back to the 1998 granting of its emerging-sport status. These days, many colleges offering Varsity Equestrian are signing some of America's top amateur riders to their teams—and scoring donations of high quality horses as well.

Signs of the organization's rapidly rising profile are visible everywhere.

During the past 12 months, nearly 234,000 hits have been logged on the Varsity Equestrian website—and the number of interested candidates who've submitted Equestrian Athlete Questionnaires (a preliminary step toward getting on the Varsity Equestrian track) has exploded since 2006. If Varsity Equestrian's current expansion rate continues, it will help the organization achieve full-blown NCAA Championship status, which would

require only 17 more schools to add Varsity Equestrian teams.

Two of the many people thrilled by Varsity Equestrian's steady progress are Larry Sanchez, official spokesman for



(Photo courtesy of OSU Sports)

"National awareness and respect in the horse industry for the caliber of Varsity Equestrian competition is increasing all the time," noted Larry Sanchez, spokesman of the Varsity Equestrian network.

the Varsity Equestrian network, and Meghan Boenig, chairman of the Varsity Equestrian Steering Committee.

Sanchez is head coach of the Varsity Equestrian team at Oklahoma State

University, and Boenig is head coach of the Varsity Equestrian team at the University of Georgia. Sanchez said he expects Varsity Equestrian to pick up even more momentum as a result of increased commitment from the NCAA.

"Last spring," Sanchez said, "the NCAA noticed that on its list of emerging sports, a few are edging close to achieving championship status, with equestrian being the fastest-moving and largest of those sports. So they declared their commitment to help us achieve that status.

"It was so exciting to hear the NCAA say: 'We want to help you in any way we can to get to the NCAA National Championship level,' he added. "Specifically, this means the NCAA is actively promoting Varsity Equestrian to schools that might currently be looking to add equestrian as a varsity sport, as well as to schools that might be unfamiliar with Varsity Equestrian."

Eyes On The Prize

So what exactly would achieving NCAA Championship status mean for Varsity Equestrian?

"A full-fledged national championship would mean everything," Boenig declared. "It means points going toward the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics Director's Cup [awarded to schools with the most success in collegiate athletics]; it means eligibility for the all-around academic awards; and so much more, not to mention the prestige. I think you'd see us become more like other sports, and we're already seeing those similarities emerging in the areas of uniforms, venues, spectators, cheering, scoring and officials, just to name a few."

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Sanchez agreed. "The NCAA also would take over the operation and management of the VENC," he said, "instead of coaches and volunteers doing it. It would help out tremendously to have the NCAA's resources to help promote our national championship and our sport in general. At our end, the Varsity Equestrian Promotions Committee has become very organized at putting out educational DVDs for prospective schools, and we're working with the various horse show associations to educate potential recruits.

"Right now there are several schools who've verbally said they would add a varsity equestrian team, to help equalize their women's sports with the men's sports under Title IX—which was the impetus for many of the existing Varsity Equestrian schools to come on board," Sanchez added. "But because of budget constraints tied to the current economy, those schools that are waiting in the wings will have to wait another year or two."

Sanchez noted that this might be a quiet time, but he's optimistic about the future. "[We] will continue our march toward increasing to 40 schools and achieving NCAA championship status," he noted.

Sanchez is also elated by having cleared one recent, significant hurdle: The Central Championships, an annual round-robin contest between the four Varsity Equestrian universities from the NCAA Big 12 Conference, received conference approval this year to officially acquire the title of Big 12 Championships. (The newly named 2009 event took place March 27-28, and Oklahoma State University emerged the winner over Baylor University [Texas].)

Official sanctioning of the Big 12 Championships was "a huge development," Sanchez remarked, "because it's an attractive element for other Big 12 schools that aren't yet part of Varsity Equestrian. So much rides on the conference, and in the past, our sport not having an officially recognized championship within the conference may not have been as appealing. If other conferences around the country take note of this, it could be beneficial to the growth of Varsity Equestrian."

With the hope of overall NCAA Championship status coming soon, Sanchez and Boenig agree that they and their fellow coaches (all of whom put in countless volunteer hours on

Meghan Boenig, the coach of the University of Georgia, believes the abilities and attributes students develop while in the Varsity Equestrian program "translate very well to the working world after graduation, regardless of whether the graduate chooses to work in the horse industry or somewhere else."

Varsity Equestrian committees throughout the year) are no doubt looking forward to eventually getting back to solely doing what's on their original job descriptions—that is, coaching and recruiting.

"Now is an exciting time," Sanchez stated, "and it's a fun time for those of us who feel like we're the pioneers of this emerging sport."



Blending VE And IHSA

Varsity Equestrian Coach Larry Sanchez of Oklahoma State University believes that riders who choose to take the Varsity Equestrian path aren't limiting their employment opportunities when they graduate in selecting this program over the more established Intercollegiate Horse Show Association track.

He noted that Varsity Equestrian riders might also be good candidates for jobs at the 300-plus colleges that compete in IHSA events.

"Both Varsity Equestrian and IHSA alumni are valuable to sport horse industry employers," Sanchez said, "because during their collegiate careers, they have the opportunity to ride dozens or even hundreds of horses, of all kinds.

"I can't stress enough that there's definitely a need and a place for both IHSA and Varsity Equestrian, especially given our divergent formats," he noted. "For example, unlike Varsity Equestrian, IHSA teams don't have to comply with any NCAA rules or restrictions. And IHSA offers multiple skill levels of riding and showing—from novice through advanced—which is great. I've coached many former student-athletes who started as IHSA beginners and are now doing very well as competitors in the industry."

Also, said Sanchez, "many schools that host IHSA teams offer excellent degree programs in equine science or equestrian studies, which is terrific for students who want to work in this industry after graduation. And although this isn't widely known, some schools with IHSA teams offer scholarships to equestrian athletes who meet their criteria."

Reflecting the spirit of multi-organizational unity, in 2008 a coalition was formed in an effort to bolster communication and advancement among the four main entities that either solely or primarily focus on college-level equestrian sports: Varsity Equestrian, the IHSA, the American National Riding Commission and the Intercollegiate Dressage Association.

Two representatives from each group participated in a Collegiate Equestrian Summit last fall, and members continue to engage in conference calls.

"The idea," said Sanchez, "is to promote working in partnership and to make sure that information is being spread around in the way that it should—because a prospective student athlete needs to know which organization will provide the very best fit."

Spreading The Word

Meanwhile, numerous coaches, officials, students, families, horse-show organizations and others are all doing their part to shine a national spotlight on Varsity Equestrian.

There are also a growing number of young women entering into Varsity Equestrian who've already made national names for themselves in the show world, so that's helping to raise recognition.

When it comes to promoting Varsity Equestrian, hunter/jumper trainers are one potentially influential faction that remains somewhat untapped, according to Boenig.

"A lot of trainers only become aware of Varsity Equestrian when one of their students starts on the Varsity Equestrian path," she observed, "although there's an increasing number of trainers who at least have basic knowledge of what it's about. It's important for us to educate our trainers so they can go back to the circuit and local-level horse show organizations to raise awareness. If you're a trainer who lives near a Varsity Equestrian school, you should call the coach to find out more about Varsity Equestrian, because that's providing a service to your clients."

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—Larry Sanchez

Sanchez also suggested that trainers become involved with a student who is exploring the Varsity Equestrian track so that he or she is more familiar with the process and requirements and can encourage other future students.

"As coaches," Sanchez explained, "we welcome phone calls or e-mails from trainers seeking more information—and we don't have the same NCAA restrictions for communicating with them as we do with potential recruits. We also suggest that trainers attend a Varsity Equestrian competition in their area, if they have a chance to do so."

Communication between coaches and trainers is vitally important so



Grand prix rider and former equitation star Haylie Jayne rides for the University of Georgia and is an example of the quality of recruits currently competing in Varsity Equestrian.

coaches can determine if a rider fits into the program.

"Often, we as coaches will call a particular trainer to find out a little more about the background of one of their riders," said Boenig. "They'll list everything she's won, but that's not really what we're looking for. We're looking for answers to questions such as: 'What's this rider like at the barn? What's her general attitude? How would you describe her riding style? Can she ride just about anything you put her on?' We're less concerned about a recruit's winning record than we are about her character and individual abilities."

Building Tomorrow's Leaders

Sanchez and Boenig extol the lifelong benefits for students who participate on

Varsity Equestrian teams during college.

"At the staff level there are often openings for Varsity Equestrian coaching jobs right out of college—and that's an opportunity that didn't exist 10 years ago," said Sanchez. "At many Varsity Equestrian schools, there are also support positions available for the teams, such as herd supervisor or director of operations."

Boenig also noted that a Varsity Equestrian graduate comes away with many positive experiences that can apply to the outside world, but two in particular come to mind.

"No. 1 is having the chance to ride so many different mounts, which helps a rider to succeed on any horse, and this makes the Varsity Equestrian experience a fantastic preparation for becoming a trainer or a working rider,"

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said Boenig. "No. 2 is having the chance to work with a team, which is a brand-new concept to many incoming Varsity Equestrian riders."

That teamwork also involves learning how to deal with conflict, learning how to be supportive and cheering for your teammates, and learning how to truly become mentally prepared and focused under pressure.

"Those abilities translate very well to the working world after graduation, regardless of whether the graduate chooses to work in the horse industry or somewhere else," she noted.

Taking Stock

As the 2008-09 academic year winds down, Sanchez and Boenig (and their hard-working committees of coaches) aren't slowing down in their efforts to make Varsity Equestrian all that it can be.

"We're just trying get as much done as we can," Sanchez said. "There's a lot of growth happening, but it's still the same relatively small number of people trying to keep up with that growth."

Boenig said the group's short-term goals include increasing numbers in sports sponsorships [new Varsity Equestrian teams], expanded promotion, and encouraging people to become more aggressive about contacting their universities and asking why Varsity Equestrian isn't there yet.

"We need to be aggressive to get this sport the recognition it deserves," said Boenig. "We're still tackling all the issues of format, facilities, educating the public and educating the communities. We have many challenges at any given time, but we're moving down the list and checking them off. When you look at our short timeline, we've come a long way."

Contemplating all that's been achieved so far, Sanchez observed: "National awareness and respect in the horse industry for the caliber of Varsity Equestrian competition is increasing all the time. The level of riding that the Varsity Equestrian athletes have risen to is tremendous. The recruit pool is growing by leaps and bounds each year, both in terms of talent and in numbers. And increasingly higher-quality horses are being donated to the various Varsity Equestrian programs, which helps elevate the sport as a whole." 🐾

For more information on Varsity Equestrian see:
www.varsityequestrian.com.