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McCormack Makes The University of South Carolina Proud At The WEF Collegiate Equitation Challenge

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Riders from 16 colleges competed head to head in the WEF Collegiate Equitation Challenge. Photo by Anne Lang.

Galloping around a jump course or navigating a dressage pattern under the nighttime lights in the huge International Arena during the FTI Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Fla., can feel a bit daunting for veteran riders.

For many of the 21 athletes who rode in the third annual WEF Collegiate Equitation Challenge on Feb. 10, simply being at this prestigious show was a first-time experience. Throw in the pressure of being the sole person chosen to represent your college's varsity equestrian team at the event, and you end up with more than a few cases of butterflies.

But two particular riders managed to tame their nerves and trot out their "A" games to make it

all the way through several elimination rounds and ultimately find themselves posing for photos in the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center's iconic winner's circle. Kimberly McCormack of the University of South Carolina captured the over-fences title, while Taylor Brown of Baylor University (Texas) nabbed the top spot in the flat phase.

"I rode in this arena last year in the hunter derby," said McCormack, a junior from Clermont, N.J., "and had a really good time with it, so I was just trying to get back into that mentality—to just ride and trust my horses."

The event began in the afternoon with the preliminary jumping rounds, which took place under very muddy conditions (caused by heavy morning rains) in one of the smaller WEF rings. Riders from 16 colleges competed head-to-head on eight horses loaned by professionals and other individuals.

Each athlete was matched with another rider (the result of a draw), with one horse assigned to each pair—and riders were granted four minutes to warm up, including no more than four jumps. The format was the same as the one used in regular National Collegiate Equestrian Association events, where the higher-scoring rider from each pair earns the point for her school.

In this special event, the winner of each pair advances to the next bracket—which, in the jumping phase, meant that McCormack rode four different horses on her way to a win on the 3'6" finals course. In that round, McCormack's score of 87.5 topped the score of 85 for Lisa Goldman, a BU senior from Hawthorne Woods, Ill.

Afterward, a beaming McCormack stood by the arena in-gate, clutching her trophy as supporters and rivals alike showered her with congratulatory remarks.

"I had awesome horses, all the way through," McCormack stated. "They were all top quality, and I really got lucky. Riding for your college makes it even more fun to come out here and represent more than just yourself.

"It definitely is a change from when you compete alone as a junior in the regular shows," McCormack added, "and it's a different kind of pressure, but it's great when you can win for your school."

USC Head Coach Boo Major was thrilled with McCormack's victory.

"Kim did a great job," Major declared. "We really had a lot of confidence in her to come down here and do a good job. So it's just icing on the cake to have her win. Kim has a very calm demeanor when she rides. She's very businesslike and gets the job done. She's just a natural rider, extremely talented and gets along with just about any horse she gets on."

"Top Of The Top"

The flat portion of the event took place with just two brackets of riders, as this phase was new to the collegiate challenge this year. At regular varsity-level events (conducted under National Collegiate Athletic Association sanctions that are carried out by the NCEA), an equal number of flat and fences riders compete for points.

In this phase, USC's Katherine Schmidt defeated Christina Lin of Auburn University (Ala.), while Kimberly Hewson-Budnik of Fresno State (Calif.) was edged out by Brown—who then

went on to best Schmidt. The final score from the panel of two judges was 143-164.

"We had so many top collegiate riders here," said Brown, a junior from Palmyra, Va., "so no one could take anything for granted. It's the top of the top riders coming in here, and the flat is completely new [at this competition], so I didn't really know what to expect.

"Also," Brown continued, "this is my first year of getting to know how to ride in the flat phase. It's so different than the regular shows on the A circuit, yet when you really think about it, it's still the same ideas. You just have to put it all together.

"I love my college," Brown concluded, "and this is a great accomplishment for our team. We've all worked really hard this year, and I'm just so proud to have represented them."

During the afternoon, a consolation bracket was created from the eight riders who would not be advancing to the evening finals over fences. The winner's trophy in that bracket went to Caroline Cramer, a senior from Ponte Vedra, Fla., who rides for the University of Tennessee-Martin. Cramer defeated Juliana Fischer, a sophomore from Wellington riding for Southern Methodist University (Texas).

"It's challenging to ride so many different horses in such a short amount of time," Cramer admitted. "My first horse was a little equitation horse, and my last horse was a big jumper. The mental challenge is competing against girls that you grew up riding against, who you know are wonderful riders. It can be intimidating sometimes, but it's fun overall."

Cramer said she's happy that her win helped put the spotlight on UT-Martin, which has one of the smaller rosters in the NCEA network.

"It helps us get our name out there, so people can get to know about UT-Martin and maybe go there," she said. "We have a very good up-and-coming equestrian program, so this win is very encouraging."

The remaining athletes who competed in the fences phase were Carly Anthony of the University of Georgia (recipient of two separate high-score awards for the day); Abbie Britton of Sacred Heart University (Conn.), Maggie Earle of Texas A&M University, Samantha Elser of Oklahoma State University, Nellie Foosaner of the University of Miami, Caroline Foltz of Delaware State University, Haley Jacobi of Texas Christian University, Amy Lang of New Mexico State University, Sarah Mershon of Kansas State University, Jennifer Waxman of AU, Hillary West of FSU and Santana Wright of South Dakota State University. Demonstrating the flat-phase pattern was Kaitlin Perry of TCU.