



Southern Schools Rule At Varsity Equestrian Nationals

Georgia, Auburn and South Carolina take top titles in Texas.

Anne Lang

At the end of the awards ceremony following the Varsity Equestrian National Championships—contested April 17-19 in Waco, Texas—chants of “SEC! SEC!” echoed to the rafters of the indoor arena.

Those cheers for the Southeastern Conference came from exuberant riders representing the University of Georgia (winners of the overall championship, with combined points from hunt seat and western); Auburn University (winners of the overall hunt seat championship); and the University of South Carolina (winners of the overall championships in individual hunt seat equitation over fences and on the flat).

The happy chanting was a fitting display of solidarity at the sixth annual edition of this major competition that brings together the top 12 teams in each of the two disciplines to ride against one another (in a seed-bracket format) for the VENC crown.

The event represents varsity equestrian’s status as a National Collegiate

Athletic Association “emerging sport,” a classification bestowed upon it in 1998. Nearly two dozen colleges comprise the fast-growing VE system, which will advance to full-blown NCAA Championship status when a minimum of 40 teams have come on board. Clearly, momentum toward that goal is building: Besides the SEC, collegiate-sports conferences represented at the VENC included the Big 12, Western Athletic, Southland, Ohio Valley and Independent.

For the University of Georgia, this year’s overall VENC win was a welcome repeat of similar titles won by the school in 2003 and 2004. (UGA also nabbed the overall hunt seat championships those same years, as well as at the inaugural VENC in 2002.)

“Winning those two right off the bat,” said UGA head coach Meghan Boenig, “we kind of set a standard for ourselves. The people coming in as freshmen right after that never had a title under their belts, so I

think this win was particularly special and important for all of our seniors. To be able to graduate out with a national championship ring is incredible for them.”

UGA finished third in hunt seat and second in western, which still gave the school enough points to claim the top spot overall. (Reserve champion overall was Texas A&M University, which finished second in hunt seat and fifth in western.)

“While we were thrilled to death to be in the top bracket,” Boenig stated, “I think we wanted more! In fact, I know we did.”

Boenig is philosophical about the competition UGA was up against, however. “Every year,” she observed, “varsity equestrian has improved by leaps and bounds. If you look at the names of riders listed now, the quality of horses and the level of jump heights, you can see that the quality of varsity equestrian has quadrupled in the past three years.

“It takes a lot to stay on top and on the cutting edge, whether through recruiting,



(Wilfrid Gomez Photo)

Auburn University earned the Varsity Equestrian National Hunt Seat Championship with team members, from left, head coach Greg Williams, assistant western coach Lisa Helfer, Ali Loprete, Anna Schierholz, Chelsea Anheuser, Katie Breedlove, Dottie Grubb, Jessica Braswell, Jenny Reinhart, Rebecca Rifkin, Coburn Park, Elise Fraza and assistant hunt seat coach Lindsay Neubarth.



coaches or horse donations at the various universities," she added. "So we shouldn't shy away from a third-placed finish in hunter seat, even if it wasn't what we strived for. This week was an emotional rollercoaster, and we generated a lot of excitement. It certainly means that much burn for next year."

► Tigers Show Their Stripes

Pulling off a minor upset in winning the overall hunt seat championship was Auburn University, which came into that discipline seeded fifth. Hunt seat assistant coach Lindsay Neubarth was greeting fans back at her team's barn after the event, where giddy Auburn riders and their proud parents were busily tearing down their setup, emptying muck buckets and throwing high-fives as they passed each other in the aisle.

"Our team has been working together all year long, and they've really focused on staying together," Neubarth said. "This week, that all paid off. We were able to change riders in and out so they all had a chance to ride, and they didn't stop. They were very brave to all the jumps—they just went out there and attacked the courses, rather than being conservative—and that worked out."

Regarding the over fences phase,



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Coburn Park, of Auburn University, concluded her varsity equestrian career as a member of the winning hunt seat team at the nationals.

NCAA VARSITY EQUESTRIAN NATIONAL HUNT SEAT CHAMPIONSHIPS

Waco, Texas—Apr. 17-19

TEAM

1. Auburn University
(Anna Schierholz, Jessica Brasswell, Alexandra Loprete, Dottie Grubb, Chelsea Anheuser, Coburn Park, Katie Breedlove)
2. Texas A&M University
(Kristi Waldal, Lindsay Smith, Katie Henion, Erin Ivy, Ashlie Soderstrom, Brittany Dodson, Christina Matz, Lindsey Lawrence)
3. University of Georgia
(Kelly Bonau, Haylie Jayne, Kitt Ritter, Kelley Cowperthwait, Michelle Blair, Daisy Whelan)

Also competed: 4. Oklahoma State University (A. Blais, J. Osterstock, B. Mahoney, N. Chappell, S. Collingsworth, M. Wooschlagler); 5. University of South Carolina (N. Bourgeois, M. Massaro, K. Terebesi, E. Kunsman, S. Stephens, V. Middleton, A. Haskell); 6. Baylor University (K. Vicary, N. Brown, M. Smitson, H. Healy, B. Banister, C. Wilson, S. White); 7. Stephen F. Austin University (E. Landes, R. Spencer, K. Landes, S. Zelikoff, A. Routzon); 8. Kansas State University (L. Yates, A. Collett, W. Snyder, K. Marvin, J. Giralain, J. Wolfert); 9. University of Tennessee, Martin (V. Bernert, M. Thompson, P. Brennan, M. Fly); 10. California State University, Fresno (J. Jory, K. Nenneker, C. Kissell, L. Wells, L. Blair, K. Bullock, M. Hames, K. Sohns); 11. Delaware State University (K. Karnbach, K. Blair, A. Butler, K. Brown, E. Tuttle); 12. New Mexico State University (S. Suazo, C. Helmuth, E. Robinson, M. Keeley, J. Friend).

Neubarth said: "I loved the courses. We hired a professional course designer this year, and I think it made a wonderful world of difference. The courses offered flow, as well as questions—which true equitation courses should do. There were places to add a few points to your score here and there, which made it fun for the girls."

As for the flat phase, Neubarth said it's always tricky when a rider competes on a horse she doesn't know. "And four minutes to get acquainted isn't a lot of time," she said. "Also, things can change [between the warm-up and the test]. The way the ring was set up, a lot of the horses were getting a little looky—and that added a surprise element that wasn't very appreciated. But our riders came through beautifully."

One of those riders was Coburn Park, 22, Wellington, Fla., the Auburn team's only graduating senior for 2008.

"Winning the overall hunter seat my last year here was amazing," Park said. "I was so nervous going into my flat pattern, because I knew everything was riding on it. I am so proud of my teammates. Not just any team, but this team—the unity we had, and how much we care about each other. It wasn't just the win, it was everything that was behind it. I will never be able to compare

this experience to anything else in my life."

Park, who's about to earn a degree in zoology, credited Neubarth. "She's very supportive and encouraging," Park said. "She truly believes in us, and she's our driving force."

"Every year varsity equestrian has improved by leaps and bounds."

—Meghan Boenig

Neubarth said the Auburn coaching staff stresses team-member bonding for many reasons. "Early on," she explained, "the riders learn about the new concept of riding on a team. After 18 years of riding solo, they come to realize that the colors on their hunt coat are far more important than what they're doing individually. And we work them really hard! As we always say, 'We don't run a princess program.' We don't have groomers; our program isn't run like a typical A-circuit barn. The team members are the workhorses. I feel that my job as coach isn't just to make them better student athletes but to make them better horsewomen when they leave, as well."



Spotlight On Solos

While the team-building philosophy is one that's logically shared by all the varsity equestrian coaches, there was an exciting element added to the VENC this year: Individual championships in hunt seat over fences and on the flat.

Based on their overall performances during the regular 2007-08 season, four riders were selected for each category. In the over fences phase, it was Ally Blais of Oklahoma State University, Nicole Brown of Baylor University, Kristen Terebesi of the University of South Carolina, and Lisa Wells of California State University at Fresno. Qualifying for the flat phase ride-offs were Haylie Jayne of UGA, Bailey Mahoney of OSU, Rebecca Rifkin of Auburn, and Terebesi.

After the preliminary rounds over fences, Brown and Terebesi advanced to the ride-off. In the end, Terebesi squeaked past Brown to win 162 to 160, based on the performance of one round scored by two different judges—the standard VENC format.

In the flat final, it again came down to Terebesi—this time against Jayne. Both riders performed the technical dressage-type pattern with skill, grace and apparent nerves of steel—resulting in Terebesi defeating Jayne 164 to 163.

"They were very brave to all the jumps—they just went out there and attacked the courses, rather than being conservative—and that worked out."

—Lindsay Neubarth

Terebesi, a senior from Glenmoore, Pa., said she drew from her long experience as a varsity equestrian rider to help her win both events. "After four years of doing this," explained Terebesi, whose past trainers include Frank Madden, "I feel like I can put it all together more smoothly, more fluidly."

That's not to say that Terebesi didn't suffer some show nerves. "I got off to a rocky start earlier in the week," she confessed. "But it feels great to end on a good note."

As for her over fences round on the horse Diego (also ridden by Brown, in the required head-to-head format of varsity equestrian), Terebesi said: "He was really fussy with his face, and he didn't have the best brakes, but I used my voice and just kind of tried to balance him up using everything but my hands. That made it a little difficult, but the course itself rode really well. It was just a matter of his little in-between spots."



(Willie Gomez Photo)

Kristen Terebesi, of the University of South Carolina, earned the individual grand championship and most valuable hunt seat rider award after winning the over fences and flat titles at the Varsity Equestrian National Championships.

Terebesi said she felt a bit better going into her final flat test. "I drew a really nice horse, Caleb, from Baylor. He's a stallion, so he's really bounding. Sometimes I felt like I was going to bound right off of him! There's so much horse underneath you, and that's tough, because you have such a controlled space to work in, with such controlled movements. The last part was the lengthened sitting trot, which is difficult on any horse—and then when you have one that has that much suspension underneath you, you just kind of have to hold on."

Terebesi, who was no stranger to team sports having competed in swimming during high school, said: "College riding has been a really, really nice change. Riding on a team puts a different spin on what most of us are used to, and it lightens it up a little bit. This has been an excellent stepping stone to the next level of my riding."

She plans to turn professional. "I'm an advertising major, with a great interest in graphic design, so I think I'd like to do that on a freelance basis on the side," she said. "If I ever open my own barn, it's good to know that I could design my own advertising and market my own business."

USC head coach Boo Duncan has no doubts that Terebesi, one of the team's captains, will succeed at whatever she sets her mind to. "Kristen is very determined, very focused and very confident," Duncan said. "The combination of those things makes her an excellent rider, which she's been since day one. She gets the job done,

and has really been an incredible student athlete to have on my team. She's a great leader, and she's a calming influence on new team members. They look up to her for guidance.

"It's been an emotional weekend for Kristen," Duncan continued, "with her being a senior, and this team has practically been her life for the past four years—she's really put her heart and soul into it. She had some tough draws this weekend, and some good horses as well—it was great that she was able to show everyone that she's the champion she is. I don't know what we're going to do without Kristen, and our other great seniors, next year. That's the sad thing about coaching at a college—you only get them for four years, and then they're gone. But you'd like to have them forever." 🐾