

Equitation

More Than Just a Pretty Picture

by Jessica Smith



"Drop your stirrups."

Three words that junior riders everywhere dread hearing. But riding without stirrups is a "necessary evil," a basic exercise for learning balance, and one of the tried and true tools in the kit of riding instructors seeking to instill the fundamentals of equitation in their students—and equitation is the foundation of proper riding.

And while many juniors in their earlier years of riding may cringe at the thought of sitting the trot for what may seem like an eternity or perfecting that counter canter departure, equitation can be the most rewarding part of a junior's career. Equitation championships have launched the careers of many of today's riding legends, and there are few titles in the riding world as prestigious as being crowned the USAEq (formerly AHSA) Pessoa Hunter Seat Medal or ASPCA Maclay.

Past Medal and Maclay ribbon winners include such great talents as George Morris, Conrad Homfeld, Katie Prudent (formerly Monahan), Scott Hoffstetter, Aaron Vale, Alice Debaney-Clero, Ray Texel, Nicole Simpson (formerly Shahinian), Peter Wylde, Chris Kappler, Havens Schatt and Kelley Farmer. Only 11 riders have ever won both the Medal and Maclay. The last to do so was Emily Williams in 1999. Ronnie and Hugh Mutch made history when they became the first father and son team to ever win the Medal. Ronnie's victory came in 1950, while Hugh's win came in 1978.

Always Different
Excelling in equitation classes, whether on the regional or national scene, means different things to riders.
Katharine Smithwick, 17, of Westminster, MD, trains with Kenny and Carolyn Krome. In 2002, she won the prestigious Bryan Trophy at Deep Run, placed 10th in the USET at Devon, was 2nd in the MHSA Hunt Seat Medal Finals, placed 4th at the VHSA Hunt Seat Medal Finals and won the Gittings Finals. Smithwick's equitation training has helped her in other aspects of riding.

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"I think equitation is important because it brings together many aspects of hunters and jumpers. Equitation teaches people how to adjust their horses, while keeping their posi-

tion and being smooth," comments Smithwick. "Equitation helps me on my jumper because it teaches me how to balance, make tight turns and be able to react well if a line doesn't ride like I had planned."

Smithwick also likes the fact that in equitation, the judges can always ask you to perform different tests.

Bryan Trophy and VHSA Hunt Seat Medal Finals winner, Elizabeth Coughlin, uses the equitation classes to help her maintain a smooth fluid ride around her hunter courses. Coughlin, 18, of Lutherville, is known for her wins in the hunter ring - yet, she enjoys the challenges of the equitation ring.

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"I like taking on the challenge of different courses. Hard rollbacks, hand gallops and bounces are things I practice on my hunters at the farm. However, I am rarely asked to perform them in the junior hunter ring," comments Coughlin. "The eq ring gives me the opportunity to test my hard work, and perform exciting tests for the judges."

"Equitation has taught me the importance of having a strong base, allowing me to stay with my horse while in the air," add Coughlin.

Amateur rider, Chad Keenum, 20, also values the importance of proper equitation fundamentals. Keenum, from Silver Spring, MD, has ridden with the trainers at Rolling Acres for five years. In 2002, Keenum ended up second in the nation in the Ariat Adult Medal Finals. He also won the MHSA Hunt Seat Medal Finals in 2001.

"Equitation is imperative to a successful riding career, whether you are a junior, amateur or professional. If you look at any top jumper or hunter rider, their equitation is immaculate—with constant emphasis on position," explains Keenum. "Not only does it make one a better rider, but it makes the horse's way of going improve."

Coughlin echoes Keenum's sentiments regarding the horse's way of going. You will often hear that "form equals function" or that "your horse mimics your ride." Some equitation riders get criticized for being too stiff and posed, thus creating a rigid and inverted way of going in their horse.

"I don't like seeing trainers teaching their students to ride stiff. With stiff hands and arms, one is unable to follow the horse's mouth, and create a smooth picture," explains Coughlin.

Equitation courses are intended to be more challenging than a typical hunter course, but not as intricate as a jumper course. There are often bending lines, rollbacks, end jumps and optional tracks between the jumps presented in an equitation course. Equitation classes may also ask for a transition of gaits while on course. A variation of obstacles that you would not normally see in the hunter ring can be used in an equitation class, depending on each class's own set of rules. The idea is to keep the rider thinking at all times and to have a plan before they enter the ring.

"Equitation is as much mental as it is physical. Every step has to be planned out in order to create a smooth round," comments Keenum.

Smithwick enjoys rising to the occasion of the more difficult equitation courses.

"The one thing I don't like about the equitation [courses] at the smaller shows is that the courses are modified hunter rounds. It's disappointing to spend so much time at home working on riding bending lines, rollbacks, lengthening and shortening of strides and then not be able to do it at the shows," says Smithwick.

Smithwick voices a common concern. Competitors are often over-faced at the equitation finals because the courses they qualify over during the competition year are much less difficult than the courses at the finals.

Last year's USAEq Pessoa Hunter Seat Medal Finals course raised many eyebrows among competitors. Kip Rosenthal, who judged alongside George Morris, designed the course. With only seven jumps in the ring, competitors were asked to negotiate a series of serpentine across the middle of the ring over an in and out and three singles—as well as mastering jumps on the end of the arena. This course asked very basic questions and easily separated the class. An airy, narrow gate that served as an end jump created a lot of problems for riders.

In the given course, Rosenthal and Morris wanted competitors to ride off their eye and carry a nice brisk pace around the course. The only related distance was the oxer to oxer one stride. The judges rewarded riders who went back to basic horsemanship skills to assist their decision making while on course. Riders who were told to put a set number of strides between the in and out and end jumps often found themselves in trouble.

A Tough, Analytical Mind, Soft Hands and A Good Horse

Trainer Carolyn Krome of Westminster has been working with equitation students for 37 years. Her list of star equitation students include Beth O'Connor, who won the MHSA Hunt Seat Medal and the Gittings Finals; Bryan Trophy winner, Albert Urbina; VHSA Hunt Seat Medal Finals winner, Page Ewalt; and Nicole Wood, who has won the MHSA Adult Medal Finals on two occasions.

Krome is very enthusiastic about the changes in the equitation ring in the last 20

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years. Krome explains that the addition of different equitation classes and finals gives riders of all levels more chances to ride over challenging courses. Krome praises the changes in rules that have allowed a more diverse selection of jumps to be allowed on courses. Water jumps, triple combinations, narrow jumps, jumps with no wings and jumps negotiated at an angle are all obstacles that Krome believes present a good challenge to equitation riders.

“Good courses,” states Krome, “are ones that ask the rider to be able to make smart turns, be adjustable and be able to regulate distances.”

She goes on to explain that George Morris is a master at setting equitation courses that ask good questions of the horse and rider.

There are certain characteristics that make a good equitation rider.

“A good equitation rider has to be analytical and have mental toughness,” explains Krome. “They also need to have competitive strategy. They aren’t always going to have their trainer’s assistance, so they need to know how to make good choices.”

But we also have to remember that the “horse” is as important as the rider in making a successful equitation duo.

“Horses that are attractive, move rhythmically, have good form over fences and are brave—can excel as a good equitation mount,” describes Krome. “A good equitation horse also needs to be well trained to the rider’s aids.”

Krome, who has observed the USAEq Medal Finals for the past 40 years, gives great reviews for the equitation finals that are offered locally in Maryland.

“Getting to watch the top level equitation riders from across the country for an entire weekend at Capital Challenge is a real treat,” comments Krome.

One change that Krome would like to see in the equitation sector is a change in judging. She notes that there are too many judges who aren’t up to the challenge of judging equitation. According to Krome, these judges are looking for the rider who finds their distances and get their lead changes. Krome wishes more judges would be focused on smoothness, precision and position.

So riders, it’s time to drop your stirrups and get working on those long hand gallops to the single oxers at the far end of the ring. Equitation finals are only four short months away! ■

Modern Equitation Competition

The goal for many juniors each year is to test their mastery of equitation by qualifying for state, regional or national equitation finals.

Mr. Alfred Maclay, and avid breeder, exhibitor and judge, was the man responsible for inception of the **ASPCA Maclay Finals**. Maclay was the backbone for the then AHSA’s (now USAEquestrian) administrative structure, provided the first rule book and initiated having a steward at each recognized horse show.

Maclay’s desire for juniors to excel in horsemanship prompted the creation of the ASPCA Maclay class, but a separate equitation class was also formed by the association: the AHSA Medal, now the **USAEq Pessoa Hunter Seat Medal Finals**. The finals for both of these classes were held on the same weekend at Madison Square Garden and were for years known as the Medal-Maclays.

When there were too many qualifiers to house the Maclay Finals at Madison Square Garden, regional competition was initiated to produce a top group of finalists to show at the Garden. To qualify for the ASPCA Maclay regional competition, a rider must win two blue ribbons. However, with the recent changes in venue for the National Horse Show, it seems that the locations and qualifying procedures for the Maclay Finals change annually.

Qualifying for the USAEq Pessoa Hunter Seat Medal Finals depends in which area of the country a rider resides. Zone 3 riders must earn 25 points. The Medal started changing location from year to year, eventually finding a permanent home at the Pennsylvania National Horse Show in Harrisburg, PA. The standard course for all Medal classes is a figure eight jumped twice.

The Medal and Maclay have always been a goal for junior equitation riders, but other equitation series have developed, allowing for a more diverse group of riders to participate.

The **Washington International Equitation Classic** finals are held during the Washington International Horse Show. For junior riders on horses, the **Tad Coffin Performance Saddles Equitation Finals** is split into two sections, a hunter phase and a jumper phase. Scores from both phases are added together to determine the top finalists. Those finalists are brought back for a final work-off. WIHS has increased the number of riders for the Finals from 25 to 35, and will host a party Saturday night for all 35 riders.

This year the Equitation Finals will be featured in prime time, Saturday evening, just before the \$10,000 President’s Cup Grand Prix. The final ten riders will not only compete before thousands of spectators, they will do so on a horse they have never ridden before, as true a test of horsemanship and riding skills as can be had. They will be allowed a few minutes of schooling on the flat before being faced with a technical jumper course.

An equitation final is also held at Washington for juniors on ponies. These riders are asked to negotiate an equitation course; the



top percentage of the class return on the flat and then do additional testing over fences if necessary.

Qualifying for the WIEC finals occur at A rated horse shows throughout the country during the competition year.

Junior pony riders also have the opportunity to show in the **USAEq Pony Equitation Finals** held during the **USAEq Pony Hunter Finals**. To qualify, riders must win one USAEq Pony Medal class held at USAEq recognized events throughout the year.

The **Ariat Adult Medal** is offered nationwide at most A rated shows to amateurs in the Adult Amateur Hunter or Jumper divisions. They earn points based on how many riders are in the class. The top 30 from throughout the country are invited to the finals at the Capital Challenge Horse Show.

The **Stateline Children’s Medal** has the same specifications as the Ariat Adult Medal, and their finals are also held at the Capital Challenge.

Locally, there are the **MHSA Hunt Seat Finals** for adults and for juniors on horses or ponies, as well as the **Gittings Horsemanship Finals** for juniors on horses. To qualify, riders must obtain 10 points, including at least one first place, during the show year in qualifying classes at MHSA recognized shows.

The Capital Challenge Horse Show offers an entire weekend devoted to equitation for amateurs of all ages. A **Monarch International/National Hunter Jumper Council Equitation Finals Champion** is crowned for both the flat work and over fences at the end of the weekend. An Adult Amateur equitation championship is also awarded.

Many unrated shows offer equitation divisions—often with two over fences classes and a flat class. Criteria are often based on the rider’s age, height of the jumps and how many blue ribbons they have won at a recognized show, with plenty of options for new riders—or riders who are new to equitation.