



More saddle time accelerates an already impressive progression for Cal Poly San Luis Obispo-bound eventer.

by Kim F. Miller

From a college admissions counselor's perspective, Mackenzie Davison has it all. Good grades, work and volunteer experience and years of consistently pursuing a passion. Where some kids strive to check those boxes with varying degrees of authenticity and enthusiasm, Mackenzie has a passion for horses that tied them all together naturally.

The Cal Poly San Luis Obispo-bound Mackenzie is a Training Level eventer. She keeps and cares for the family's horses at their home stable in San Diego County's San Marcos. She's been a working student for her aunt Erin Kellerhouse's Swift Ridge Eventing in Temecula for a few years, and volunteers with CANTER to help prepare Off The Track Thoroughbreds for second careers.

Mackenzie enjoys competing, but it's the everyday aspects of life with horses she's most drawn to. Her mom Julie Davison rides, too, and they share the considerable responsibilities that come

July 2020 - Senior Spotlight: Mackenzie Davis

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Wednesday, 01 July 2020 05:47

with keeping two horses, one Miniature and one pony at their home stable. Pony Club and recreational riding were mainstays of Mackenzie's early equestrian upbringing, but never far from her aunt's watchful eye. She began a more focused eventing path in 7th grade, first with the pony Skye's The Limit, and is grateful for how Erin has helped shape her into a brave and confident rider.

"I've always had a very strong internal drive to do better," Mackenzie explains. "Erin has pushed me just enough to make me a more brave and stronger rider, but never enough to break my confidence."



Happy to have another dedicated equestrian in the family, Erin has enjoyed influencing and having a front row seat for Mackenzie's journey into adulthood. The young rider started out as shy as she was smart -- which is very. "Now she's blossomed into this adult that we have great conversations with," Erin shares. "It's really fun."

Her riding has become better and bolder, too. Mackenzie is trusted to school several of the Swift Ridge horses. Riding more often these last few years, and on a variety of horses, has accelerated the developed of her natural skills. "Instruction is a huge part of getting better, and so is riding horse after horse," Erin observes.

"You get the muscle memory and a chance to figure out the little details that make them better. A lot of learning happens when you ride on your own, versus having someone telling you what to do every second."

Working with OTTBs through a CANTER branch at the Del Mar Fairgrounds has increased Mackenzie's saddle time and broadened her education. "We get to work with a lot of different horses with different personalities and, in some cases, some issues that have to be worked

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through,” Mackenzie explains. Going slow is the guiding principle for all training steps as the horses go from not having been ridden with traditional sporthorse training cues to working on the lunge line, short flatwork sessions and small jumping courses.

Swift Ridge client and amateur competitor Hilary Burkemper sees it all come together during frequent lessons alongside Mackenzie. “She is positive and assertive in her riding and her horse is responding to it. She has her mind in the game and she doesn’t get flustered.” Out of the saddle, “She is a lovely girl and a good kid!”



Driving Forces

Riding isn’t the only thing that’s required some guts. Last summer, Mackenzie learned to drive the trailer and make the one-hour haul to Temecula on her own. It was nerve wracking at first. “It was with my dad and we just went only about 15 minutes away. It was scary having my horse in the trailer. He’s my baby! I didn’t want to hurt him.”

The “baby” is 12-year-old Irish Draft horse Balla Ruan. They’ve been progressing together for the last three years, and more quickly since the COVID close-down of school enabled more time to ride. Five or six shows a year has been a typical agenda for the pair that had hoped to contest Woodside and Twin Rivers horse trials this spring.

Horse girl that she is, Mackenzie took the event cancellations in stride. “I try not to take my competition goals too seriously,” she explains. “I know that stuff always happens and things don’t work out.” Training milestones are better than ribbons in her book. “I have really wanted to

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improve my riding, so I'm basing it off how I rode everything instead of how I place." Improved dressage is the most tangible result of more riding and lessons these days, she says. "It is getting better and more consistent."

Summer Send-Off

With the Galway Downs Summer Horse Trials just cleared for take-off July 17-19, Mackenzie hopes that will be one of a few shows she'll contest this summer. She also hopes to start Cal Poly on campus in the fall, but that was an unknown as of mid-June. Regardless of when she can physically start at the San Luis Obispo campus, she is sure it's the right fit. Agricultural Business is her expected major, with a minor in Equine Science, all on a track toward a career in the horse world.

Classes that include colt starting, training and horse husbandry are among the "amazing and cool" opportunities she's excited about at Cal Poly. She's taking Balla Ruan with her with an eye on becoming a Mustang eventing and dressage team member.

Along with getting to spend more time working for and riding at Swift Ridge, Mackenzie says a pandemic upside is getting to do some senior year high school activities a little differently. Having no prom or grad night is "disappointing," she acknowledges. "But we've had our own different kinds of celebrations, maybe more memorable." Her graduation ceremony, for example, entailed each student driving to the site, then walking on their own across a stage and stopping to make a speech. "I think we spent more time in the actual graduation process than we would have normally."

While equestrian is typically an outlier sport during high school, it had its advantages over mainstream sports during this weird final semester. "It's given me a distraction," Mackenzie reflects. "Without it, I'd basically be home worrying about everything, like a lot of my school friends are doing. And, I get to keep going in my sport and with a purpose."