



Jumping rider development pathway is becoming well trod.

by Kim F. Miller

DiAnn Langer has been talking about the “pathway” for a long time. As USEF Youth Chef d’Equipe, she’s led the way in establishing a clear progression for young athletes with international jumping aspirations. National governing bodies in mainstream sports – volleyball, basketball, baseball, etc. – have long had these and DiAnn is among many to feel equestrian sport deserved and needed the same.



So it’s gratifying when a 12 year old Zone 10 Pony Jumper Champion from last year, Caroline Mawhinney, targets this year’s Childrens team for the Adequan™ FEI North American Youth Championship because “I saw that’s what I’m supposed to do.” Or when Zones 3 and 4 field close to 80 horse/rider combinations for the sophomore season of the United States Hunter Jumper Association’s Zone Jumper Championships. Or when some kids opt for a jumper-only route earlier in their junior career after developing a strong foundation in the equitation division.

It's all evidence that the pathway is in place and young riders are taking advantage of it, for their own benefit and that of the sport. A joint effort of the USHJA and the USEF, the pathway consists of educational opportunities and benchmark competitions at progressive levels of horsemanship.

Jerra Mays, 22, of Hemet, participated in two of the pathway's educational events this year: the Emerging Jumper Athlete Gold Star clinic with Richard Spooner in January and the Emerging Athlete Program regional training session with Kip Rosenthal and Nanci Synder in June. She loved both and described the difference between them as EAP "being all about you and your horse," and the Gold Star being about that, along with the "overall picture of the sport." She considers them great complements to each other and hopes to ride in both again.

The educational events are as important as the pathway's competitive benchmarks, DiAnn says. To that end, the next addition is the USHJA's Emerging Jumper Rider Platinum Clinic, aimed at those contending the 1.4M and 1.45M divisions, and open to professionals, juniors and amateurs. That program is expected to debut in 2019, while the Gold Star Clinic, for 1.10M to 1.35M levels, embarks on its second year, this time with three clinics around the country. The West Coast edition will again be concurrent with the early weeks of the HITS Coachella show circuit. (Dates and clinicians were being firmed up at presstime. Visit www.ushja.org for the latest.)

Pinnacle Benchmark This Month

The pathway's pinnacle competition happens this month with the Adequan® FEI North American Youth Championships. "It's right there at the top," says DiAnn of "The Youths'" place in the pipeline.

"It should be the hardest both to qualify for and to participate in." Sport leaders, she notes, "have done a huge amount of work on the Championships, adding value to the event itself (including significant prize money) and value for the winners." Those leaders include Task Force Members and Zone 10-ers Ned Glynn, Charlotte Skinner-Robson and Morley Abey.

Formerly known as the North American Junior Young Riders Championships, the event has

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always been an intense introduction to international competition. That ratchets up this year with a U.S. Young Rider squad needing to earn team gold or silver to qualify for the inaugural Youth FEI Nations Cup™ Final, in Belgium this September. Assuming the U.S. gets one of those podium spots against Canada and Mexico, the three highest placing American Young Rider individuals, and two discretionary choices, will be sent to Belgium. “It will be just like the Nations Cup Finals in Barcelona for our Senior riders,” DiAnn explains. The new competition reflects the FEI being on the same page as the USEF in believing that “youth education and competition are the most important things for our sport.”



As pleased as she is about the pathway’s progress, DiAnn is also pleased that riders understand it’s not the only route to the top and that they can enter and exit as needed to accommodate their circumstances, whether horses, academic tracks or budget.

All points on the Jumping Athlete Pathway are “giving a lot of people good direction,” DiAnn concludes. “It’s really helpful for the parents, too, to have an idea how things work and in determining what they want to do, where their children are supposed to be going and using the benchmarks to see if it’s working.”

Indeed, parents watching their daughters ride in the EAP Los Angeles clinic in late June praised that aspect. One participant’s mother, Darby Bonomi, is an experienced horsewoman and a sports psychologist, and she appreciated the program’s inclusion of parents in the unmounted sessions and the way the whole program helped educate parents new to the sport on what is involved for their kids to succeed. “It’s a very complex sport.”

Another parent, Shala Ehteshami, had no prior experience with equestrian sports. As such, she appreciated the EAP giving her daughter something she couldn’t: a sense of what top-level horse care involves and requires.

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It has and continues to “take a village” to build the development pathway, DiAnn emphasizes. All members of the USHJA Emerging Jumper Task Force have outdone themselves, as have the hosts of the Zone Jumper Championships. Larry and Marnye Langer and Charlotte Robson-Skinner are Zone 10 Task Force powerhouses, and HITS Coachella is the Zone’s Championship host.

Zone 10 at NAYCs

Based for the last several years in Aiken, S.C., DiAnn spent most of her career as a Grand Prix rider and trainer in California. But any possible West Coast bias is not needed to predict a good outcome for the region’s team at this month’s Youth Championships. She notes that Zone 10’s young riders are especially proactive about capitalizing on pathway opportunities and she expects that to pay off.

Early summer’s USEF Junior and Childrens Nations Cup teams for Langley, BC, were stacked with Zone 10-ers now headed to the NAYC: Hayden Zadel, Alyce Bittar, Dylan Laiken and Alexa Leong were selected by DiAnn amongst the national pool of potentials. Hannah Loly was, too, but couldn’t compete due to a broken foot and Parker Cliff was part of the Children’s team. Junior and Children’s team gold validated DiAnn’s selections.

Zone 10 should also benefit from having a season-long chef d’equipe in Michael Endicott and technical delegate in Darren “Dagwood” Roberts. In past years, the chef was usually chosen at the end of the qualifying season and was often the coach of one or more team members.

This year, Zone leaders including Kathy Hobstetter advocated for season-long continuity. Along with Michael’s extensive experience, it helped that he had no student in the hunt: he and his wife Christa’s son Mitch was heading to Europe to continue his budding Grand Prix career this summer.

While he admits not being sure what the position would entail at the outset, Michael saw the benefits of his and Dagwood’s role as the qualifying process began. “Dagwood and I worked together very closely through the trials, discussing what we wanted to see.” Height and width were just the beginning. “We wanted the max specs, starting out that way and not letting off the

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gas. We wanted actual water in the Liverpool, for example.”

In the last trial, at Sonoma Horse Park, they added a big, solid wall. “If you don’t sit down and ride to that, or the Liverpool, things happen.” Things did happen in the early going, Michael acknowledges. Yet the final outcome was as intended. “We have a lot of talent and a lot of good horses, but many were not used to consistently having to jump at a certain level. The trials made them mature that much faster.”

This year, the unique Zone 10 qualifying process mixed its traditional trials with a money-won path that is used by all other Zones in the country. That caused some confusion and frustration over delays in knowing who had made each team. It also had the upside of allowing riders competing outside of the zone, or in bigger Grand Prix, to qualify outside of the trials, like U25 star Ransome Rombauer and Hayden Zadel.

“I think the trials system really sold itself,” says Michael. Its ability to prepare and select horses and riders got Zone 10 “to the point where I think we could have sent two Junior teams.” Going forward, he’s in favor of using money-won to determine the Young Rider team and trials for the Juniors.

Overall turn-out was excellent, Michael says of the 30 or so pairs who sought “A” or “B” team spots. “Based on what I’ve seen, I think we have an excellent shot to be competitive with both teams. It always comes down to nerves and how the horses and riders are on those days, but I think everybody has a shot.”

Michael’s chef d’equipe role covers the Young and Junior Riders teams only. The Childrens squad, and Pony Jumper Championships-bound riders, both look poised to defend their gold team and individual medals from last year.

The Zone 10 chef knows the young rider development pipeline well and credits the many opportunities available today with helping develop a strong team. He rode in the Youth Championships himself, he thinks in 1985, and applauds today’s plentiful slate of chances for ambitious equestrians to compete at high levels. Not long ago, “It was just Young Riders and Harrisburg Prix Des States (at the Pennsylvania National Horse Show). Today it seems easier to travel, to pop your horse on an airplane and go somewhere.” And formal parts of the

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development pipeline, including the George Morris Horsemastership Clinic in which his son took part, provide beyond-riding education that's critical to success moving up the levels.

As the North American Youth Championships unfurl Aug. 1-5 in North Salem, NY, the beneficiaries of various jumper rider development programs face a big benchmark in their journey. Here's hoping Zone 10's riders put the sport's investment and their own hard work and talent together when needed to bring home medals.

Golden, hopefully!

(Editors Note: USEF Network and FEI TV will livestream the jumping and dressage NAYC competition, which is held concurrently in New York Aug. 1-5.)

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