

Locals on the international stage, membership growth and upcoming conventions are regional highlights.

Two years ago, Chris Scarlett retired from UC Davis after 31 years as a veterinary technician, but she hasn't exactly slowed down. The much-admired eventing veteran happily accepted a second tour as Area VI chairman, she continues to coach eventers, to ride students' horses and to travel widely and wildly. A horseback safari in Mongolia and a trip to Botswana are among her recent adventures.



An Advanced rider in her heyday, Chris has long been an Area VI cornerstone as a coach and competitor. She's also well-known for developing The Oxford Don, an Advanced mount she retired at 16, at the Festival of British Eventing at Gatcombe.

Chris last served as Area VI chairman about 10 years ago and enjoyed the position. "It gives you a terrific look at the sport – a different vantage point than that of being a competitor or a student." So she said "yes" when outgoing Chairman Bea DiGrazia asked her to re-up.

Happily, there is good news to report and also plenty of challenges to tackle, most of them shared by eventing communities throughout the country. Chris brings perspective and experience and an embrace of new opportunities, especially social media, to spread the good word about the sport and contribute to its growth.

California Riding Magazine editor Kim F. Miller enjoyed the chance to have a "state of the sport" chat with Chris.

Kim: How are things going in Area VI?

Chris: Overall, good. The Area is up in membership and this is true around the country. This year our riders have had some really great accomplishments that are an exciting reflection of our Area producing the appropriate events in the right order for them to move up.

Starting with Lauren Billys going to the Olympics, of course. Tamie Smith competing at Blenheim and in France, Bunny Sexton running Burghley this fall and Robyn Fisher taking Betawave to the CCI2* 7-year-old World Championships in France are other examples. On the amateur level, Ruth Bley winning the Preliminary and Training divisions at the American Eventing Championships is further evidence of that.

We have a lot of great organizers. Robert Kellerhouse is a visionary as far as seeing the big picture; John Marshall has really stepped up the game at the Fresno County Horse Park; and the Baxter family of Twin Rivers Horse Park in Paso Robles has been great. It's very nice to have these big events.

We've also added new smaller events up north with the Camelot Equestrian Park in Oroville and the Woodland Stallion Station in the Sacramento area. Woodland in particular is trying to do more of the recognized one-day events.

Kim: Earlier this year, you spoke of good growth in starters for the higher divisions but noted that Area VI wasn't doing so well with entries in the lower division – a problem throughout the country. How's the outlook there?

Chris: We hope this one-day format is going to take off and that that will help at all levels. John Strassburger spoke of the one-day format's appeal during our US Eventing Association Town Hall meeting in May. They are more affordable, for exhibitors and organizers, and more manageable for adults who work and kids in school.

I sometimes hear people suggest that doing all three phases in one day is too hard on the horse. The real design of a one-day event is that dressage is your warm-up for show jumping, which is your warm-up for cross-country. Rather than a three-day, in which you are warming up for each single phase each day. The design of a one-day is so efficient and it promotes the idea that every phase is related to the next phase. Sometimes I think we forget that.

We are a little behind the 8-ball when it comes to one-day events, in part because our state is so big. We are looking maybe for one-day trials as qualifiers for the big destination events, so you don't have to drive to the other end of the state just to qualify.

Kim: What are some other priorities?

Chris: Developing a bigger pool of Young Rider coaches is something we are focusing on. We're trying to get more of the younger riders educated and licensed so they can start to take over some of the coaching for the Young Rider teams. You have to have Instructor Certification Program Level 3 certification to do that. We have a lot of coaches at that level, but not all are able or willing to take time off to be a team coach. It's a big commitment. Bec Braitling has done a great job as chef, and we'd love to get Lauren Billys doing it. And for anybody, it's only good for their careers.

We are also looking into reviving the Young Rider Team Challenges at one of our year-end events. We have kids in our Young Rider program, doing Beginner or Beginner Novice and Training Level, who are not necessarily the ones going to the North American Junior Young Rider Championships in the next year or so, but the Team Challenge is a way to get them some team experience before that.

Kim: And what about the Adult Rider program?

Chris: That continues to be very strong. We have several camps in Northern and Southern California and we are getting high quality instructors for them.

Kim: Eventing has a voracious need for volunteers. How is Area VI doing on that front?

Chris: I think the whole sport is always struggling for volunteers. Area II has created a volunteer website that the USEA is trying to adopt on a national level. The idea is that people sign up to volunteer, hours are tracked and acknowledged by area and nationally to recognize those who've done the most. It's a volunteer leaderboard, if you will.

We hope to tap into that and are lucky to have Sunsprite Warmblood's Donald Trotter stepping up to finance this kind of recognition for volunteers in our area. We're anxious to get the program up and running.

Another idea we are working on is adding volunteer training opportunities at events that we hope would interest parents and other family members who are at the event anyway. It's a great way for them to learn a little more about the sport. Riders often volunteer, but they can't until they know their own ride times, so that makes it hard for organizers to fill positions in advance.

Kim: It seems like Area VI has really stepped up its online presence.

Chris: Yes. Our goal is to use social media to help keep everybody more informed. There is so much happening in our Area, it's almost like people can't get a weekend off! But it's good to have so many choices, including clinics with very good instructors.

Frankie Stutes at Athletux, Inc. is doing a great job with the Area VI website and we are working on expanding to more social media outlets. We have Facebook pages for Area VI Young Riders and Adult Riders, and we want to set one up for Area VI as a whole. We're working on an Instagram account and a newsletter that would prompt people to visit the website a little more frequently.

Kim: Tell us about the Area VI annual meeting, set for Feb. 17-20 at the Fresno County Horse Park.

Chris: We are pretty excited about what's in the works. We have international riders Tamie Smith, Lauren Billys and Bunny Sexton and, hopefully one more person, set to talk about their international experiences: what made them do it, what they learned from it and why they would do it all over again.

This will be held during the February Fresno Horse Trials and on President's Day weekend, hopefully making it convenient for a lot of people. And we've obtained a screening of the movie Harry & the Snowman to show Friday night, which should be a lot of fun. We are working on having a cross-country Instructors Certification Program session on that Monday, Feb. 20, which is President's Day holiday.

For the last three years, the annual meeting has been a big success, held at Galway Downs in Temecula and staged with an ICP symposium and Robert Kellerhouse's fundraising clinic for the venue. It was called the "Trifecta."

In the interest of keeping as much of the membership involved as possible, we need to move the location every few years. We hope we can create the same kind of pull as the Trifecta did. Looking further ahead, the US Eventing Association's annual meeting will be held in Long Beach in December of 2017 and we are really excited about hosting it. We want to start promoting that now and make sure every one of our members makes plans to attend.

Written by CRM

Saturday, 01 October 2016 04:41

Kim: Thanks for your time and all you do for the sport!

Chris: You're welcome.