

Varsity equestrian loves being acknowledged as an athlete who works as hard as those on any other team.

Entering her senior year at University of South Carolina, Erin Fry has already enjoyed many great moments as a member of the school's National Collegiate Equestrian Association team. But few may compare to the one she anticipates this fall when she and her fellow Gamecock equestrians are presented their NCAA championship rings at Williams-Brice Stadium in front of an expected capacity crowd of 80,000 fans at a home football game.



Even before the hoopla surrounding the latest of USC's three national championships, Erin says she has loved every aspect of riding for a varsity team. "I played softball for a little while in high school, but other than that I was never able to be on a 'real sports team'." At USC, equestrians receive coaching, conditioning, class registration and all other amenities afforded to football players and other varsity athletes, plus costs are covered by the athletic department. "We work just as hard as any of the other athletes do and our school does a great job of treating us that way," Erin comments.

The experience comes with the responsibilities of upholding the academic end of the bargain: in Erin's case a double major in business and entrepreneurship with a minor in sports administration. And complying with standards expected of all Gamecock student athletes.

Being an NCAA athlete is often described as having a part time job as far as the time commitment goes. "I have loved every second of being on the team and it's never hindered my overall college experience," Erin notes. Like most kids who juggle top level equestrian competition with good high school grades, Erin had a headstart on time management skills. They've been enhanced by the collegiate riding opportunity. "Scheduling everything can be a little chaotic," she admits. "But I've learned to manage my time better and to be very efficient."

Erin has always encouraged high school age riders to consider and educate themselves about NCEA opportunities. Her biggest advice to those interested is to be proactive about approaching coaches. "In a lot of other sports, the coaches come to you, but in equestrian sports it's you going to the coaches." And that's especially true for riders who are not big players on the East Coast medal and equitation circuit, she notes. "If you are not among the top 50 or 100 on the East Coast it's kind of hard for coaches to know about you." (Learn about NCAA guidelines for student-coaches communication first at www.ncaa.com .)

Erin was a top hunter and equitation rider on the West Coast throughout her junior years training with Robin Stiegler, yet she knew the onus would be on her to become known to NCEA coaches. "I kept myself on their radar screens with e-mails every few weeks telling them what and how I was doing. I wanted it really bad."

With the number of NCEA teams static at 22 for several years, the number of openings has not grown, but the pool of contenders has as more learn about this collegiate riding route. "You can't sit back and wait for coaches to reach out to you. They have too many kids coming to them."

As an incoming freshman three years ago, Erin was actually planning to attend a different university where there wasn't a riding opportunity. But when USC called with a last minute (May of senior year) opportunity to join the team as a "walk-on," she jumped on it. Walk-on status typically means the student is not offered athletic scholarship money, a situation that Erin finds is misunderstood by many. "A lot of people think that if you ride for an NCEA team, you are getting an athletic scholarship, but that's not always the reality." NCEA schools are entitled to give 15 full ride equestrian scholarships. But not all schools choose to and, even for those who do, they can't cover everyone on rosters that can be up to 60 and 70 riders, even though they can be divided among students.

"It's really important not to just focus on athletic scholarships," Erin advises. "You want to look at the likelihood of getting an academic scholarship, too. That was a big factor in helping me decide and for a lot of girls on our team." It can also happen, as it did with Erin, that riders are offered athletic scholarships in their later years on the team. As scholarshiped seniors graduate, that money is returned to the pool. Erin was thrilled this past summer to get a text from her coach saying they wanted to double her athletic scholarship for her final year of eligibility.

Erin acknowledges that the recent uncertainty surrounding womens equestrian as an NCAA "emerging sport" was scary. (see story, page 46) But there was nothing riders could do about it and the Gamecock equestrians never felt it would threaten the existence of their team.

News that womens equestrian would retain its emerging sport status is "reassuring," says Erin, whose dad Chuck Fry is part of the National Advisory Board charged with moving things forward. "I'm hearing now that a lot of people are very reassured about NCEA equestrian being around for a long time."

Erin was one of two California riders on the 2014/2015 USC Gamecock 38-rider roster, along with current sophomore Raleigh Bacharach. This season, California Riding Magazine correspondent Sydney Callaway joins the team to make it a trio of California girls on South Carolina hunt seat squad.