

National Collegiate Equestrian Association executive director sheds light on the sport's future.

Varsity womens collegiate equestrian got good news in June with the rejection of a recommendation that the National Collegiate Athletic Association strip the endeavor of its "emerging sport" status. (California Riding Magazine, August 2015) Accepting the recommendation would have stopped the now 13-year effort to evolve the sport from "emerging" to full-fledged "championship" status and the NCAA-funded championships and other advantages that go with that.

The number of schools with an NCAA equestrian team has been stuck at 22 for many years. That's 18 schools short of the 40 needed to warrant NCAA championship recognition, and several of those comply with NCAA requirements and have that status, but compete on the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association circuit. The IHSA league caters to teams that, for the most part, are student run and student funded and not subsidized or organized by the their school's athletic department. (For a look at an IHSA powerhouse, see the feature on the Stanford University program, page 40.)

Even though there's been no growth in the number of NCAA teams lately, most of the schools with an NCAA team have great reports about the success of their programs. The teams provide the coveted experience of being a student athlete, many with athletic scholarships attached. Priority class registration, access to the school's conditioning equipment and coaches and the recognition of being a student athlete are among these extras.

From the school's standpoint, attracting riders often means attracting coveted high achievers with impressive applications.

The recommendation to remove equestrian from the emerging sport list was issued last fall, by the NCAA's Committee on Women's Athletics. The move motivated the National Collegiate Equestrian Association, which is comprised of schools with NCAA equestrian teams, to restructure itself, create an executive director position and work with its National Advisory Board to strategize for future growth.

California Riding Magazine editor Kim F Miller asked NCEA executive director Dr. Leah Fiorentino for help understanding some of the issues and challenges going forward.

Kim: Is there a time limit for NCEA to get the 40 schools needed to attain full Varsity status?

Dr. Fiorentino: The original time limit was 10 years. Equestrian exceeded that and that's why there was the recommendation from the Committee on Women's Athletics. We don't know if there will be the same time limit going forward.

The NCAA notified us that they believe collegiate equestrian should continue as they examine all criteria for championship sports. The NCAA is now looking at all sports, not just equestrian, to define what it means to be in the emerging sport or championship sport category. They have a strategic planning summit in mid-August and we know there will be discussions about our sport, but we don't know how it's all going to shake out, other than that they support us in continuing.

Kim: Why has it been so difficult to get more schools on board?

Dr. Fiorentino: We are finding that there were quite a few schools that were interested in developing these sorts of educational opportunities through athletics, but they just hadn't been hearing a lot about how to do it. We've been providing them with information on the costs, types of equipment and facility they'll need. Most are institutions that have a current club team structure and are now considering rolling that into a varsity team that is supported by their athletic department.

Keep in mind the NCEA was restructured, and the National Advisory Board formed, only five or six months ago. We've done a lot but are still just getting started.

Kim: Are you aware of any interest from California schools, beyond Cal State Fresno, which already has an NCAA team?

Dr. Fiorentino: No. We would love to see more West Coast schools represented. It would be wonderful for Cal State Fresno to have more local teams to have meets with. But, I'm not aware of any interest from the West Coast yet. We have had communication from schools in the Southwest and the Rocky Mountain area, which seem like promising areas.

And our National Advisory Board has two members based in California, Chuck Fry and Kassy Perry, so I'm sure they are focusing on that region.

Kim: Why is it valuable to have more NCAA teams when there are already close to 400 schools with Intercollegiate Horse Show Association teams?

Dr. Fiorentino: First, we are not in competition with the IHSA, and we support their efforts to provide competitive equestrian opportunities for college students. I want to be clear on that. We compete in a different format. It's head-to-head competition, and in four divisions: Hunter Seat on the flat and over fences; Western horsemanship and reining. Schools need to fill all four divisions in order to compete. On the Hunt Seat side, NCAA fence heights are 3'3" to 3'6", which makes it a different setting. The riders each complete the maneuvers on the same horse and the rider with the higher score earns a point for her team.

And there is the opportunity for recruiting, athletic scholarships and the same campus

opportunities that are available to all other NCAA student athletes at the school. Also, schools with an NCAA team can still compete in IHSA shows.

Kim: Why would women's equestrian be appealing to a school?

Dr. Fiorentino: It was introduced as an emerging sport, in 1998, as a way to help institutions begin to build opportunities for women athletes and to help comply with Title IX (gender equity) legislation that arose in the 70s. It continues to be very effective for that purpose.

Women's equestrian also brings an entirely new base of donors that can be cultivated for both individual donations and connections for sponsorships.

Equestrians tend to be the type of model students that athletic directors love to brag about!

There is an athlete pipeline that is just bubbling over with wonderful riders who would bring a great deal of talent to a school. Coaches won't have to look hard to find excellent riders to recruit.

Kim: It seems surprising that our notoriously expensive sport could be appealing to schools from a cost standpoint.

Dr. Fiorentino: It is awe inspiring to see what happens when you look at Equity Accountable Data Access (EADA) reporting on the per-student cost for various sports at a school. It has to do with dividing the cost across the whole roster. When you consider that an equestrian team may have 60 to 70 members to spread the costs between, and a gymnastic team, for example, may have seven or eight, you can see how it begins to make sense.

Kim: Has it been a drawback to expansion that women's equestrian does not include men?

Dr. Fiorentino: Again, the sport came into the NCAA as a women's sport in the emerging sport category and for some institutions it helped to meet Title IX requirements. We understand that it's a natural for both genders, but we have to follow the NCAA rules. At some point in the future the timing may be right to talk about including men, but it's not the NCEA's decision to make.

Kim: How can readers help get more schools to form an NCEA team?

Dr. Fiorentino: Parents might be able to rally the institutions they would like their daughters to attend and encourage them to add the sport as sponsored by their athletic department. Our coaches receive hundreds of video tapes a year from potential student athletes and there are not enough seats for them on the current rosters. Each school has different roster limits they can't exceed and there are a limited number of scholarships. The NCAA allows Division I and II equestrian teams to offer 15 scholarships for women's equestrian. Not all schools can afford to fund that many, and even when they can, if the school has 60-70 team members, those get spread thin and/or can't be offered to all team members. (Scholarships can be divided among athletes.)

Kim: How will things change if and when NCEA gets the 40 schools needed to attain championship sport status?

Dr. Fiorentino: It won't really change things for schools that already have teams. It will mean that the national championships will be funded by the NCAA. Right now, coaches and team members solicit funds to cover the cost of the championship.

The addition of schools will also add strength to conference competition opportunities and will

allow for schools to schedule more regional competitions, further reducing travel-related expenses.

Of course, it would mean more educational opportunities through athletics and that's why it's a key part in our effort to elevate and advance equestrian to the most sustainable and strongest of all NCAA women's sports. This is one of the reasons our National Advisory Board is so critical. Our NAB members are experts in business and they are helping us re-conceptualize how the sport can attract sponsorships and other ways to offset its costs, for teams and for the national championship.

Kim: Thank you and best of luck!

Dr. Fiorentino: You are welcome!

Understanding NCAA, NCEA & IHSA

The National College Athletic Association (NCAA) is responsible for administering and setting policies on most areas of intercollegiate athletics such as: competition and practice hours, recruitment, eligibility and financial aid for many of the sports that are played at college. The NCAA governs "athletic competitions" that are sponsored (paid for) by the institutions' athletic department.

College Equestrian can be very confusing because many of the programs (over 400) are actually sponsored through the institutions' recreation, club sports or student affairs departments and are run as clubs. This does not mean that these "club programs" are not competitive. It just means that the programs are sponsored by the recreation department or by a student organization, funding comes from the students or the club and the rules of the sport are governed by the disciplines' individual organization (i.e, the Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association, the Intercollegiate Dressage Association or the American National Riding Commission, etc.)

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