

Riding schools getting respect and rewards as critical to sport's growth.

by Kim F. Miller

The equestrian world is full of differing opinions, yet one thing everybody agrees on is that growth is desperately needed. That call was issued several years ago from camps including the United States Equestrian Federation and its many discipline affiliates to the American Horse Council, which represents an even broader field of horsey pursuits. The U.S. Pony Club launched its Pony Club Riding Centers and the growth of the Interscholastic Equestrian Association continues to give newcomers a relatively affordable entry point for the sport through high school and middle school teams.



Surrounded by the USEF's Join The Joy campaign and a new \$25 fan membership, the latest effort to draw more people to horses is the United States Hunter/Jumper Association's Recognized Riding Academy program. It was announced at last November's annual meeting as part of the organization's bigger Sport Growth Initiative.

So far, the USHJA has accepted 34 riding schools nationally, six of them in California: Bridges

Equestrian in San Juan Capistrano; Elvenstar in Moorpark; Hansen Dam Riding School in Lake View Terrace; Hunter's Edge in Las Vegas, BTH Equestrians in Shingle Springs; and Liberty Riding Academy in Modesto.

Per the USHJA's description, the RRA program "acknowledges lesson programs, riding facilities, equestrian schools and other types of educational equestrian programs that emphasize horsemanship and sportsmanship, promote safety and offer introductory hunter/jumper lessons. These programs create a foundation for well-rounded equestrians who benefit the entire sport, and this recognition is designed to encourage the continued development and growth of these types of programs across the country."

The benefits of membership include a listing on the USHJA's website, a recognition plaque, the opportunity to participate in the USHJA Affiliate Equitation awards, discounts on USHJA Trainer Certification Program manuals and USHJA member benefits. In return, recognized schools are asked to encourage students to join the USHJA and the organization has a growing base of prospects to market its benefits to.

RRA status is a tool newcomers can use to find and distinguish between local riding school options and helps veteran equestrians make responsible referrals if they don't offer beginner lessons themselves.

Inviting Entry Points

The USHJA's RRA and its unrecognized local Outreach shows, along with the USEF's new \$25 fan membership, demonstrate that movers and shakers in the sport are gaining a sense of urgency about "Making the entry level more inviting for everybody," notes Larry Langer, a longtime sport leader and principal player in the Recognized Riding Academy's development. The catalyst was the realization a few years ago that the hunter/jumper sport was either at a one-percent growth rate or possibly in decline. That triggered the Sport Growth Committee to look at various "parts and pieces" of the industry and figure how where and how growth could best be incented.

Similar realizations inspired the American Horse Council's Time To Ride Challenge. In its fourth year now, the Challenge is offering \$100,000 in mostly cash prizes to equestrian endeavors that introduce new people to horses. Time To Ride began in 2011 as a collaborative effort between

several equine enterprises, including the USEF.

“These organizations shared the same concern: a big decline in riders and owners,” explains Christie Schulte, TTR’s marketing manager. The bad economy surrounding the nearly decade-old recession is the obvious, but not the only, culprit. “A big group of baby boomer women were retiring out of horse ownership and participation and not as many youth are getting involved.” Christie notes that almost all youth sports are seeing a decline in participation: lacrosse and gymnastics are the exceptions.

“There are broader societal factors,” she adds. “Kids just aren’t as active as they used to be and families are so pressed for time.” Urbanization and the accompanying loss of rural land also contribute to making riding less accessible.

“We are trying to lower the barriers, in access and affordability, for people to get involved with horses,” Christie continues. Participation in the Time To Ride Challenge, for example, is open to riding schools and to veterinarians, horse-oriented businesses and any other entity that can stage an event that introduces newcomers to horses. An effort of the AHC’s Marketing Alliance, Time To Ride first tried to execute that mission by staging its own events around the country, but they found that using their funds to encourage stables, clubs, etc., to host their own outreach events was more effective for all concerned.

Over its first three years, the Challenge has introduced approximately 100,000 people to horses, Christie reports. Seventy-eight percent of the Challenge participants reported a direct increase in their business, and some stories reflect dramatic surges.

This year’s Challenge began in May and continues through September. Competition is divided between small, medium and large categories based on the size of the barn. Newcomers register for events by signing a waiver that gives the host liability protections, collects data and provides TTR with a means to measure participation and thus determine winners. Prizes range from \$8,000 to \$500 in cash and some product prizes. Governing bodies including USEF, the Interscholastic Equestrian Association and the American Quarter Horse Association have sweetened the deal by offering additional prizes or perks to members who earn a Challenge prize.

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Written by Kim F. Miller

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Several California riding schools have jumped on board with the USHJA's Recognized Riding Academy and the Time To Ride Challenge. For more information on how that's going for them, see related Riding School Spotlight, in this issue.

Resources:

- USHJA Recognized Riding Academy: www.ushja.org/ridingacademy
- Time To Ride Challenge: www.timetoride.com