

# A FRONT ROW SEAT BEHIND THE SCENES: NAJYRC MENTORSHIP

*The 2016 edition of the USEA Young Rider Mentorship Program gave four Young Riders the opportunity to go behind the scenes of the NAJYRC and learn from officials and experienced equine professionals, gaining a better understanding of career paths, skill development, networking and goal setting for their future. Here is a firsthand account of two of their experiences.*

BY RYAN TYNAN

As a participant in the Young Rider Mentorship program at the Adequan/FEI North American Junior and Young Rider Championships (NAJYRC), I discovered so much about what goes on behind the scenes in the sport of eventing. My assigned mentor was James Atkinson, the cross-country course designer, but I was also able to follow and learn from many people involved with different aspects of eventing and the NAJYRC. I met all three of the Ground Jury (Gretchen Butts, Polly Ann Huntington and Kellie Towers), the Technical Delegates (Tom Rykewart and Robert Stevenson), and the show jumping course designer (Chris Barnard). I sat down and talked with the Meg Krueger, Chief Operations Officer (COO) of Colorado Horse Park and even got to meet Diane Pitts, President of USEA. I visited with Howard Simpson, who had a major hand in the creation of the Young



James Atkinson takes Ryan Tynan around the cross-country course. USEA/LESLIE MINTZ PHOTO

Riders' Championships Program, and Gina Miles, the 2008 Olympic silver medalist. I felt like an eventing VIP. All of this is thanks to the wonderful Vicki Howard-Fine, the heart and soul of the NAJYRC Mentorship Program.

Even though the NAJYRC and Mentorship Program weren't scheduled to start until Tuesday, I arrived at Colorado Horse Park early Monday morning. Most of the cross-country coursework would be going on before the show even started and I wanted

to spend more time with my mentor, James Atkinson, and his right hand man the course builder, Greg Schlappi. James walked me through the courses; explaining why he put a particular jump in that order and location. James also noted what he thought he would need to change at each jump before it was ready to be ridden, from where to place the flowers and décor to parts of the wood on a jump that needed to be rounded out to prevent injury in case of impact by a horse.



Vicki Howard-Fine flanked by the Mentorship participants: Katie Canario, Ryan Tyman, Taryn McKee and Louisa Flaig. USEA/LESLIE MINTZ PHOTO

James paid particular attention to the footing throughout the course and he was constantly watering it to make sure by the time a horse ran the course the footing would be perfect. It really opened my eyes that as a course designer, James had to think about the location and order of jumps, but also the elements that he couldn't change like the footing and the location of trees and woods. James kept the view of the course from the rider's as well as the horse's perspective. In addition, he explained that on some of the jumps he put two sets of flags to help the horse see how long a jump was. Later in conference with the other girls in the Mentorship Program, Louisa Flaig, Taryn McKee, and Katie Canario, we were all surprised to see that "the smallest details can change the difficulty of the fence and the course," as Katie put it. These things aren't what a rider would think about when walking the course, but James had to think about them to ensure that on Saturday when the riders took to the course their horse would be able to understand the questions they were being asked.

The eventing portion of the NAJYRC started on Wednesday. I

watched the jogs with the Ground Jury, then headed out to help with cross-country again. Afterwards, I attended the meetings of the team Chef d'Equipes, the liaisons between competition management and the teams of riders. These are meetings that as a rider or groom, I would not have been able to attend. I got to see what was going on behind closed doors and hear about any concerns the officials and the Chefs had about events that had happened during the day and how to fix them. We sat and excitedly watched as they pulled the order of go and then later when they chose the order of competition for their riders. Sitting in those meetings helped me understand that it took a lot of people coming together to agree and make a change in the competition. For example, it was suggested that the barns open at an earlier time to ensure that horses were prepared for jogs. It was incredible to see how many people are involved in making the NAJYRC run smoothly.

Thursday and Friday included a crash course in all the things the Ground Jury did on dressage day, and it changed how I look at the Ground Jury and dressage judges. During the NAJYRC competition, I sat in

the dressage boxes and listened to the judges process and score tests. I realized that the dressage judges don't really want you to do badly or to give low scores. They try to give the best scores possible, and I noticed that precision and visible effort to complete a movement scored the highest. I have always been a little apprehensive to approach an official at a show, but after sitting with the Ground Jury for hours watching them go through the dressage tests and getting to ask questions about the scores awarded to each competitor, I no longer feel as intimidated. They were so willing to answer our questions and encouraged us to feel comfortable in the conversations – it was really amazing. In the end, getting to talk to the other girls in the Mentorship Program about their experiences was the cherry on top. We each had different perspectives from our day and bounced our ideas off of one another.

When Saturday came around it was finally time to watch the cross-country course in action. I got to sit with James and two of the other girls that were in the Mentorship Program, Louisa and Katie, during the cross-country day. We all picked James' brain about what he thought about each pair as they ran →



the course, and if they had done well in riding the course as he envisioned.

We also helped fix the jumps when the pins were activated by a horse knocking the jump with a little too much force. It was amazing to hear James' perspective about how the course overall was riding, if it was giving enough people trouble at a difficult fence and if it was riding well. Saturday was a success and a blast.

Sunday, the last day that we had in the Mentorship Program, did not disappoint. After saying thank you to the mentors who had allowed for the program to function, we went and walked the show jumping course with the course designer, Chris Barnard. He talked about how he wanted to make the course hard enough that people would drop rails, but that everyone would make it through. He encouraged us to move around while watching the course so that we could see each jump from a different perspective. We cringed when rails were dropped and celebrated the clean rounds, too. It was incredible to watch each horse struggle at the jumps Chris had highlighted as difficult and really jump well at others.

As the show came to a close and we said goodbye to each other, I knew my experience at the NAJYRC would not have been the same without the great girls who shared my passion to learn more about the sport and the people who run it. As Taryn put it best, "(she) enjoyed the time we spent as a group the most. We were able to go work with the separate officials and then come back to the group and share or compare what we had learned, so we not only got to see what the officials were looking for, but also how each other interpreted those same views." I am forever grateful for the opportunity I was awarded and for the amazing Vicki Howard-Fine who organized this fantastic Mentorship Program. So if you are looking for another way to participate in the NAJYRC next year, watch out for the call for "manatees" and apply for an excellent behind the scenes adventure. 🐬



Katie Canario watches and learns from the judge's stand. USEA/LESLIE MINTZ PHOTO

## BY KATIE CANARIO

**M**onday, July 25th, 2016, was a day I had been looking forward to for months. I sent in my application for the Mentorship Program early spring and waited anxiously to find out if I had been accepted to participate. The program officially started on Tuesday afternoon, but when I got offered the chance to start early I jumped on it. This fall I will enter into my junior year of high school. With a lot of important decisions to be made about my future creeping up on me, I knew the Mentorship Program was something I wanted to do. The opportunity to see and learn about different jobs within the equine industry before I have to make any decisions about what comes after high school was exciting.

After arriving at the Colorado Horse Park I met Vicki Howard-Fine, the Young Rider Mentorship Program coordinator. She instantly made me feel welcome. I was introduced to my main mentor for the week, Dana Diemer, the FEI chief steward. I got to spend a couple hours following Dana around the barns and in the eventing office. Later that afternoon I got to help the vets with in-barn inspections. It was

fascinating to see how they can handle a great deal of fit, excited and nervous horses from three different disciplines. The next morning I again spent time with Dana. This time we went to check on the cross-country schooling area and the gallop track to make sure they were in order for the riders to use. After that, we monitored the eventing arena to make sure all of the horses being worked were being treated with care, and that every horse was sound and of good health. After lunch with my Area VI team, two of the other girls doing the Mentorship Program and I headed out to the cross-country course to help rope off the warm-up ring. We all had a good laugh about how long it took us to get the stakes into the ground compared to the course builders. That afternoon we headed to the main office to listen in on the Chef d'Equipe meeting.

Wednesday dawned early to the eventing jogs. All of the proteges stood next to the Ground Jury during the jogs. After the jogs we were able to ask the Ground Jury any questions we had about the jogs. Then we headed out to walk the cross-country courses with the Ground Jury. We stopped at every combination to walk the strides and

talk about the question. The Ground Jury discussed among themselves to make sure the questions were as clear as possible to the horses. That evening at the chef's meeting, teams were declared and individual order was picked. I found it very interesting to watch as chefs and coaches attempted to strategically place both their team and individual riders in the best possible ride times.

Early the next morning I sat in the dressage box at M to watch the CICY2\* dressage. It was amazing to watch the tests from a judge's perspective. Hearing the comments made on each movement and the overall ride was one of the most memorable parts of the week for me. I loved getting to understand what the judge was looking for and understanding how better preparation before or after a movement would have changed the ride. After the CICY2\* dressage we headed out for a course walk with cross-country course designer James Atkinson. It was fascinating to see how he looked at the course. I never knew how much thought went into the decorations on a fence or the trees surrounding it. Everything was on or around the fences for a reason and changing just the littlest detail on the fences would change the way they rode. That evening we attended the safety meeting. It was interesting to listen from the perspective of a rider because the participants planned for things I never even thought of. We spent all day Friday rotating between judges boxes during the CH-J\* dressage.

I got up early Saturday morning to listen in on the jump judges' briefing. Then I headed up to the control tower and the viewing area where the Ground Jury were setting up to monitor cross-country. Mid-way through the day I hopped on James Atkinson's golf cart to see what his cross-country day is like. It was amazing to see the fences from a ton of different angles. We also checked in with jump judges and witnesses whenever something went wrong at a fence.



Technical Delegate, Robert Stevenson, instructs Taryn McKee. USEA/LESLIE MINTZ PHOTO

Sunday morning we met the show jump course designer, Chris Barnard, and got to walk both the CH-J\* and CICY2\* courses with him. He did a wonderful job explaining what each fence tested in a horse and rider and how the course was designed to be challenging but very fair. We were able to watch a couple of riders do their rounds with the designer. He was very pleased with the way his course was riding and explained how the course had to be ridden to produce a clear round and the mistakes riders made causing rails to fall. After the CH-J\* show jumping ended we walked the CICY2\* course again. This time we walked with the Ground Jury. The Jury was fast and effective making sure the

course was fair for the level and all the fences were safe. After watching the CICY2\* awards presentation it was sadly time to say goodbye and thank everyone who mentored us throughout the week.

The Mentorship Program was one of the most eye opening weeks of my life. I have walked away with more knowledge and information than I know what to do with. As I begin the process of trying to understand and use all I have learned from the Mentorship Program, I realize how truly lucky I was to be able to participate in such an amazing program. I recommend it for any dedicated, hard working young rider who wants to experience different sides of the sport. 🐾



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