

The Return of the Young Rider Mentorship Program

By Meagan DeLisle



The 2024 participants of the Mentorship Program pose for a photo with some of their mentors from this year. *Holly Covey photo*

Our sport is only as successful as the pipeline of professionals who dedicate their careers to seeing the sport survive. From judges to technical delegates to course designers and more, the backend of a horse trial is powered by a small group of individuals who love the sport of eventing so much that they decided to pursue a professional path to keep it alive.

In 2008, the then Area IX Young Rider Coordinator Vicki Howard-Fine noted that we needed a pathway for young riders to experience the behind-the-scenes tasks that take place at large-scale FEI competitions in order to better portray the various career opportunities available to them in the sport outside of riding professionally. Thus, the Young Rider Mentorship program was born.

"I thought to myself, 'How are we going to keep these younger kids involved in the sport if riding at the upper levels wasn't in their future?' A number of us talked, and I said that I would work on something, which is what we did."

Since then, Howard-Fine has navigated the slew of applicants that came in each year and set them up with these shadowing opportunities with officials of all backgrounds to give them a first-hand look at life as a technical delegate, judge, course designer, and more. She has held the selected applicants to a high standard each year.

"I set high expectations for these young riders regarding confidentiality and professionalism," she shared. "It is really clear when you read through these applications who is committed to doing this or who is thinking this is just a cool opportunity. These applicants

who are selected are very committed and very mature, and from this experience, we have had kids go on to USEF to work, take on internships at the USEA, or begin training for other avenues that allow them to work within this sport because they were exposed to other sides of this world."

A New Chapter

While the program took a break for a few years post-COVID, it came back in 2024 as strong as ever at the USEF Eventing Young Rider Championships, and this time with some new blood as Howard-Fine introduced Holly Covey as the new program facilitator.

"My inspiration for helping out with the mentorship program really began with the outstanding young

rider coordinator of Area II, Chris Donovan," shared Covey. "She encouraged me and many others to help out with the young riders program, and like a lot of other eventers who worked with young riders, I found them very inspiring!"

In 2023, Covey had the opportunity to coordinate an Area II-specific mentorship opportunity at the Plantation Field International Horse Trials (Unionville, Pennsylvania) alongside judge Debbie Adams and FEI stewards Eileen Pritchard-Bryan and Catherine Baker. When Howard-Fine began looking for her successor for the program, Donovan and John Bourgoin put Covey's name forward.

"Together, we are planning for 2025 and beyond," said Covey. "I can't praise all of the people who help with this program enough. Without the help of these outstanding individuals in the sport, programs like this would not exist. They are generous individuals who love the sport and want to see young riders thrive."

Howard-Fine and Covey have taken this program, which was previously only offered once a year at the Young Rider Championships, and expanded it to allow for two additional opportunities at the 2025 USEA Intercollegiate and Interscholastic Eventing Championships which takes place at Stable View in Aiken, South Carolina, in May and a West Coast venue which will be announced at a later date.

"I think the mentorship program has an immense value to the sport of eventing because it is familiarizing our young riders to the inner workings of the sport from the competition management point of view," noted Covey.

"Up to this time in their riding careers, most young riders are competitors. By joining a mentorship opportunity, it expands their exposure to horsemanship, training, and sportsmanship. In addition, mentorship provides a deep and close understanding of the responsibility to our horses and to the safety of the riders. And lastly, it exposes them to teamwork and cooperation. The mentorship program is really an investment in the future of the sport, as well as a wonderful way to allow young riders a great introduction to what could be a lifelong occupation."

The mentorship is structured for riders ages 18 and up, but historically



The 2024 participants had the opportunity to shadow members of the ground jury, technical delegates, and course designers. They are pictured here witnessing the horse inspection from the viewpoint of Marilyn Payne. *Holly Covey photo*

Howard-Fine has accepted riders as young as 14 when their application was too impressive to turn away. She believes taking the program to the USEA Intercollegiate and Interscholastic Eventing Championships is an excellent step in the program's growth.

"These young people are on a different trajectory in their life," noted Howard-Fine. "They're graduating college soon and are beginning to think about what they want to do next. This is where I feel the program really belongs."

She is excited to see how the program will continue to expand and meet its full potential under Covey's guidance.

"I give Holly incredible praise," she shared. "She is really enthusiastic, and I think she will do an excellent job."

Nicola Villarino's Experience

As a Young Rider this year, I really wanted to join in the fun and experiences at the USEF Eventing Young Rider Championships at the Maryland International, so when our Area II Young Rider Coordinator, Chris Donovan, suggested I apply for the mentorship program, I did. I was hoping for a good educational experience, and it ended up being pretty magical to be there. It really inspired me and

An Opportunity Like No Other

Riders interested in participating in future Mentorship Programs for the 2025 season are encouraged to reach out to their Area Young Rider Program Coordinator for more details.

For the 2024 eventing season, two applicants, Nicola Villarino and Izzy Lenk, were selected to participate in the Mentorship Program at the USEF Eventing Young Rider Championships at The Maryland International + Horse Trials in Adamstown, Maryland.

After their experience, both riders were asked to write up a summary of their weekend taking part in the program. Read on to see how the experience shaped them!

taught me a lot about the management of eventing competitions.

My Favorite Educational Experience: The Official's Course Walk

My first day's experience really opened my eyes and was my favorite part of the week. We met with all the judges and officials and walked all of the courses from the CCI4*-S to the



From left to right: Peter Gray, Nicola Villarino, and Marilyn Payne. Holly Cooney photo

CCII*. It was very hot and exhausting, but hearing all of course designer Ian Stark's insights, including his plan behind every single jump, was very enlightening. Sometimes, some of the officials may have disagreed, they would then discuss it, providing even more insight.

As a rider, on cross-country I never really thought of why a jump was there, or the intention of the designer—I only thought of how to ride the jump in front of me. Walking with the officials at the championship, I learned a lot more

about what each jump was supposed to be asking. It gave me reasons to think a lot more about how I'm riding. I now ask myself, "What is the course designer really asking here?" and how Ian explained the different jumps is now going to run through my head when I walk my course.

A Big Personal Dressage Breakthrough

I'm a rider who struggles with the perfection required of dressage, and sitting in the judging booth with

Marilyn Payne, one of the best judges in our sport, was a bit intimidating. I found out quickly that there was no time to be shy! Things happen very quickly in the judging booth, and you have to be sharp. Marilyn repeatedly said that judges really want to give the best score that they can to every rider, for every movement, and that one movement won't necessarily affect the score of the next or even the total score at the end.

They were using a new test, and I had the experience of watching several top riders mess up! For me, it would mean the end of the world, but watching riders like my idol, Will Coleman, stay calm, discuss the error with Marilyn, then continue on, was very educational and gave me a new perspective on my own attitude toward dressage.

Both Marilyn and Peter Gray, who were judging together in the four-star and two-star, were like, "Laugh it off and keep going," and it made for a really good day. Being able to judge from both the booths at C and B was really interesting as well.

Team Work by Officials Behind the Scenes

On cross-country day, I was with Marilyn all day in all her roles as President of the Ground Jury (PJG) for the two-star, and a member of the jury for the four-star where Peter Gray was the President. All of the officials over all the levels helped out. They would be in the control center when they were President of the division that was running but would be out on the course in certain areas to help communicate what was happening at the jumps or complexes when they were serving as just members of the Ground Jury. The control center was located on a hill where about half of the course was in view. Everyone had radios and golf carts or ATVs to be able to move, so they could watch horses and riders at almost every obstacle.

We were in the control center as the PJG is the decision-maker for the two-star division, but out on course for the rest of the divisions, including being at the four-star upper water obstacles, with the bounce, and watching other jumps with the other officials. I saw several of the incidents that required the judges to make decisions and also spent time watching the vet box at the end of the course.

Throughout the day, I saw the teamwork that all the officials do. The control center was overwhelming and exciting! There are a lot of radios to listen to, from the different volunteers, the vet, the startbox, etc., and it was a lot to process while still watching up to three riders who are all on course at the same time. Officials have a lot coming at them on cross-country day!

The amount of actual manpower needed to create a successful competition and the amount of work that each person is responsible for as a part of the team was eye-opening. As a rider, I had never realized the amount of effort the officials put in to make sure we all had a successful event.

The Trot-up and Show Jumping Day

The trot-up was tense! While we were present at the jogging strip, we got to see all the Young Rider horses presented. When some horses were sent to the hold box, we learned about how the rules provided for withdrawing and having a "W" versus choosing to trot up a stiff or sticky horse a second time and risk an "E" for being eliminated. The judges explained the difference to us, and we were reminded of the fact that this activity is in the public eye and that the officials always have to think of the horse's welfare.

Next, we were able to walk the show jumping course with course designer Chris Barnard and help judge in the show jumping control booth. To me, it was surprising to learn the complexities of the sport that aren't evident to a rider. In show jumping, you go in and do your round, but I realized that there are many people who are responsible for seeing that your round was correctly recorded. Again, things happen fast, and the judges have to be ready to do more than just count rails, but check the time, make sure the course is ready for the next rider, and get the right number down, etc.

My Overall Experiences

Overall, I had a great time, learned a lot, and left with more appreciation for how much it takes to run these events. Being able to participate in the Mentorship Program with my friend Izzy Lenk was also fun, especially when you add in the fact that it was a

part of the Young Rider Championship event with our Area II Young Rider team. It was incredible!

I think that the networking I experienced, along with making connections and creating relationships, was worth more than anything! I have valuable friendships that were created by this experience; Marilyn has invited me

Izzy Lenk's Experience

On June 13, I received news that I was selected for the 2024 Mentorship Program at the USEF Eventing Young Rider Championships, held at the Maryland International. I was beyond thrilled! I had read all about the program, and it seemed like an incredible opportunity. Getting to work one-on-one with the officials at the event, and being able to see everything from behind the scenes—I was speechless.

Wednesday

Wednesday was my first day, where I met up with my friend Nicola Villarino, who was also selected for the Mentorship Program. We audited Marilyn Payne's talk to the young riders about what the judges are looking for in the ring. I learned that in FEI, you always want some contact in the free walk, don't completely toss away the contact, and let your horse free, let him stretch into it. Then, I helped decorate Area II's barn. We made it look very patriotic and ready for the weekend.

Thursday

Thursday was a very exciting first day. I got the pleasure of meeting all of the officials, including getting to know Rumsey Keefe (the assistant FEI and national technical delegate), who was my first choice to shadow for the weekend.

As we got started, all of the officials included Nicola and myself in the cross-country course inspection. We started with the CCI4*-S cross-country track. This was my first time out seeing the course. The TDs had already been out on it as it is their responsibility to measure and check the fences and make sure there are an adequate number of efforts for the level. Once

to make sure to say "hi" at any event she is judging or competing in, and I am so honored by that! After I have accomplished my Young Rider competing goals, I would definitely be open to becoming an official in the sport in the future, and I feel participating in Mentorship has opened that door for me!

they feel like the course is well-suited for the level, they invite the ground juries to examine it, and once it is approved by them, the course is all set for competition.

It was very fascinating hearing how the ground juries would question things, and the TDs would explain their perspective. I learned that even minimal changes make a big difference. For instance, maybe you need to add a wood block to make a jump less vertical and more friendly for the level, or maybe you need to add more flowers in front to make a clear, more distinct groundline. Other changes might include adding two more flowers to the back side of a table so the horses can read the width or adding some footing to level a jump out. There are so many minute changes that make or break the acceptance of the course. After the approval of the four-star course, we went with the officials to approve the remainder of the courses. It was then time for lunch and more talks.

There was a Young Rider stewards meeting where we met the officials and heard a run-through of what the weekend would look like. Then we were back out on the cross-country course to walk it with Ian Stark and all the Young Riders competing. It was great to hear him explain how changing little details of the jump can present it differently to the horse and will affect how the jump is negotiated. I know this will help me on future courses I ride so that I have a better idea of how the horse will see the jump.

That evening the opening ceremonies for the Young Rider Championships were held, and I had the pleasure of helping represent Area II. We came decked out in spirit, and it was great seeing so many friends and getting to come all together to declare the start of



Chris Barnard treated the participants to a walk of his show jumping course where they discussed the details around each element. Holly Cooney photo



Izzy Lenk had the opportunity to work alongside Rumsey Keefe. Holly Conroy photo

the competition. Many water balloons, water guns, and races later we finished up the opening ceremony.

Friday

Then it was time for dressage day. I was very excited to get to sit in the booth with Sara Miller-Leary as she judged the tests. We had a system where I wrote down in my notebook what I gave each movement on the test, and if there were differences I would ask why she gave the score she did. It might have been .5 of a difference, and a lot of the time it had to do with the fact that we were positioned at B, and

you cannot see the exact angle they are riding for the lateral movements, so the score has to be based off the outline.

Getting to work with Sara was such a great opportunity and it will impact how I come into the dressage arena next time. It gave me a better understanding of what the judges are looking for—like when the horse is stretching just down to the shoulders isn't enough, the nose should almost be on the ground while maintaining contact.

After a great morning of judging it was time for lunch, and I got to catch back up with my main mentor, Rumsey Keefe. It was interesting to



Izzy Lenk had the opportunity to sit with judge Sara Miller-Leary to practice her judging skills. Holly Conroy photo

learn what a TD does on dressage day and all the disputes they have to settle. For example, if there is more than a 5 percent difference in the scores that the judge at C and the judge at B give, the TD has to have the judges meet and go over the test and see where each of their perspectives was coming from on the disagreements and go from there. At the end of the day, we attended the FEI Rider briefing, where they got to meet with all the FEI officials to go over cross-country protocols, as that was the following day.

Saturday

This was the day we were all waiting for—cross-country day! I started the day by attending the jump judge briefing, and then I went out on the golf cart with Rumsey to check each jump judge to make sure they were in a good spot. You want them close enough so they can clearly see what happens at the jump, but not too close so they become a risk or distraction. We also made sure there were enough timers for everyone who was helping with timings and at the stopping points on the course and just made sure each jump judge felt ready for the exciting day.

When everyone was all set, the start box opened up, and the riders were on their way. It was great to see how the little changes to the ground lines, the position of the jumps, and all the other details to make the course the best it could be all came together making it able to be ridden well. It was a calm morning, but after lunch, the action started to pick up. There were, unfortunately, some rider falls, and it is the TD's job to take pictures of the fences to report to FEI to see if there was any damage and get fence repair done quickly if needed.

There were also disputes, and it is also the TD's responsibility to decide on them. A rider can argue a 20, and the TD can talk to the jump judge as well as the other officials to get everyone's perspective. They can also take a look at the videos that were taken out on course. From there the TD meets with the person who argued the mark and explains their decision.

It is also the TD's responsibility to give dangerous riding cards (DR) out if necessary. If someone is riding their horse and it is deemed dangerous, it is the TD that needs to go up to

the individual and explain that their actions are not allowed. Also if there is unauthorized assistance, for example, a trainer yelling how to ride a certain part of the course when their student is already riding on the competition course. It is also the TD that needs to explain that unauthorized assistance is not allowed. There are many obstacles that the TD has to go through to make the competition day run smoothly! I found it truly educational, and it was an honor to be able to assist with that.

As the day finished, there was a competitors' party with lots of great people and great food. It was very special to be able to see course designer Ian Stark being recognized for all his hard work before he retires, and it was an absolute pleasure meeting him. They made it very fun at the party with the mechanical bull, so I got to try that out as well. It was a fabulous bonding experience with all the competitors and officials.

Sunday

On the final day of the competition, we started out with the Young Rider

Championship trot-up, and I got to stand close to the President of the Ground Juries, Marilyn Payne and Debbie Adams. It was very fascinating to see the process of having the vet look over your horse, how they looked for soundness, and how they allowed riders to present again if they were not accepted the first time. At the end of the day, the officials have to make these hard decisions to pull you out of the competition for the best interest of your horse.

Then it was time for show jumping and awards. I walked the show jumping course with the show jumping course designer, Chris Barnard, and I learned what it takes to build a course for a championship competition. I also learned all the things he has to think about to have it approved by the ground juries, like how the cups supporting the poles must have a maximum depth of 20mm. All of this information will help me provide a better show jump round next time I compete because I will be able to look back and understand that each jump was placed in its location for a reason and there's a certain way to

provide the most efficient jump round that the course designer had in mind.

I then had the privilege of sitting in the judging box with Marilyn Payne and the other officials for the two-star show jumping class. The judging process is very efficient. The judge has a final say on what occurs at each jump, the scribe records the results, there is an announcer, and there is someone who puts it into the computer to determine the competitor's final score. The judge has the main timer, and there is also another volunteer with a backup timer in case there is a discrepancy in the main timer.

I finished the weekend by watching the awards and cheering everyone on. It was a fantastic experience, and I cannot express enough how thankful I am that I was chosen to be a part of it. This experience has allowed me to walk away with such greater understanding and respect for the sport and what goes on to make an event happen. This was a big expansion of my toolbox, and being able to become more educated on the sport I love the most means the world to me! 🐾

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