



## *The Road to the*

# NATIONALS



**H**adley Benneyan, of the winning Skidmore College team, and Abigail Carpenter, on the Randolph College team, describe their journeys to the culminating show of the season at the Farm Show Complex in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

With more than 10,000 riders and 400 colleges and universities in the Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association, securing a place at IHSA National Championship isn't a walk in the park. One individual rider and one team rider share their stories of hard work, dedication, dreams and bumps in the road as they vie for a national championship.

# Success Together Is Delicious

By Hadley Benneyan



TRICIA BOOKER

Hadley Benneyan drew James as her mount for the IHSA Nationals Individual Open Over Fences class; inset, Hadley Benneyan celebrated with Coach Cindy Ford.

The 45-second countdown buzzer kick-starts my heart and snaps my mind into focus. Bonnets and big, rolled plaits. Fast and clean. Leave it all in the ring—90-seconds later, it's all over.

I'm a Jumper rider by heart, history and design.

I had a well-rounded equine education growing up. I did 4-H, showed Western Pleasure, and even tried driving before switching exclusively to English. Upon my initiation into the Hunter/Jumper world, I extolled George Morris' book like a bible, understood "form to function" as a principle and drew jump courses in the margins of my class notes.

Despite this fixation, my mixed Western background and lovely Quarter Horse didn't seem to teach me how to jump too well. I was extremely lucky to have my trainer, Lisa O'Neill, who straightened me out and let me show some of her green sales horses. I dabbled in the Hunter ring and maybe even entered a few Equitation classes, but anyone a mile away could tell you I was not an Equitation rider. I just wanted to go fast and clean.

When I tried out for the Skidmore College riding team my freshman year, Coach Cindy Ford told me, "You probably won't show this year. There's work we have to do." I had no idea just how much.

Our coaches definitely don't use the word "work" lightly. Our team members ride and train almost every day, and we our try our best to be, as Cindy says, "strong like bull." Even though we may dread the merciless no-stirrups work, the rigor and discipline that our coaches have with our team pays off. It certainly did for me.

I'm short. At 5'2" on a good day, I never had the long legs and frame of the classic Equitation rider; I felt that being a Jumper rider played to my strengths. I was designed for it. That first season at Skidmore meant a lot of adjustments for me in attitude and technique. I couldn't believe it when, in my soph-

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*“I got a lot of funny looks holding horses at the ring in full riding gear and my ‘cyborg arm.’”*

—HADLEY BENNEYAN

omore year, I qualified for IHSA Nationals in the Individual Intermediate Flat class.

I had a blast showing and received honorable mention, which inspired me to work harder and return to perform even better the next year. The Nationals, held in Lexington, Kentucky, that year, is where I truly began to understand and appreciate the beauty of the goal of the IHSA—to produce well-rounded riders who can read and quickly adapt to a variety of horses while contributing to a team effort.

For me, the variety of horses in the Skidmore barn is incredibly helpful to prepare for these shows. Still, sometimes it’s hard to connect with a horse you know well.

There’s one horse in particular in our barn that’s one of the most difficult for me to ride well, despite being one of the best draws at our shows. Facing the frustration head on, I practiced with him more than any other horse, trying to find the key that would deliver a good ride together. It became my obsession to figure this horse out. As luck would have it, when we got to Regionals in March, I drew my nemesis! All the extra work was worth it—when we left the ring, I’d won my class.

When we travelled to Zones in April, I drew Cornell’s Cocu, a sharp horse with a Junior Jumper background and sporting a bonnet! Bestill my heart! It was surely a sign meant for me, and I could not have been happier going into the ring.

As all my teammates joked, I’m probably one of the only riders that wants to pull a Jumper for an Equitation final. My background definitely came in handy, and I placed second, earning a ticket to Nationals!

## Bumps in the Road

As a team, our season-long road to the

IHSA Nationals was a little bumpier. We battled a lot of illnesses, injuries and, like the rest of the East Coast, lots of snow (great for sledding, not so much for riding). Through it all, the 32 members of our team continued to work hard in the classroom

(proudly finishing the semester with a team GPA above 3.6) and even harder at the barn.

My dad is a real “see-a-job, do-a-job” guy, and early on, I learned to place a high premium on work ethic—sometimes probably to a fault. I have to say that the group of girls on our team, without exception, work with the purpose and discipline of a well-trained surgical team. No one stands still, and directions almost don’t need to be spoken.

As it turns out, I wasn’t immune to the speed bumps along the road myself. Due to a pretty significant elbow injury, I had to take the entire two weeks before Nationals off from riding. I was worried about not having enough time in the saddle leading up to our event, but I knew that I had to play it safe with my injury and trust the process—which included lots of ice, ultrasound, Ace bandages and an overdose of worry. Come time to get on the bus to Harrisburg, my elbow was feeling much less painful, despite the full-length arm brace I had to wear. In a huge arena, it was easy to pick me out of the crowd. I got a lot of funny looks holding horses at the ring in full riding gear and my “cyborg arm.”

I was in the very first class of the first day of the show. Standing in the line for



TRICIA BOOKER

Hadley Benneyan overcame an injury prior to the IHSA Nationals and sported a “cyborg arm.”

the draw, I felt anxious and unprepared. But I was pleased that I only had to manage my anticipation for the first morning, rather than throughout the long multi-day show, as my teammates did. I drew James, a wonderful horse provided by Centenary University.

Our coach, Belinda Colgan, told me, “He’s just your ride! Up in front and in front of your leg.” I remembered that he had scored a 90 at Nationals last year—I knew I had a great draw, and I just hoped I could do him justice.

Walking down the chute to the in-gate, I was trying to just remind myself to breathe when I remembered something I was taught when I first started showing: You have 90 seconds in the ring, 90 seconds to give your horse the best ride you can. You have 90 seconds of complete attention, leaving the mistakes behind in the past, not holding back, and to leave it all in the ring. Even though I hadn’t been riding in the few weeks, I knew I had a whole season of preparation behind me and the focused concentration in the moment to give it my all.

I laid down one of my best trips of the season in that ring, thanks to James. I forgot all about the worry and just had fun confidently cruising around the course. I finished in fifth place with a score of 80 against some



TRICIA BOOKER PHOTOS

excellent rides. I couldn't have asked for a better draw, really enjoyed the ride and couldn't wipe the smile from my face until the end of the weekend. My teammates were riding great, our horses were happy and consistent, and our practice as a team really paid off.

Taking the lead from the first class and never losing momentum, the hard work of every team member, pointed or not, shone through and helped us win Nationals. As Cindy reminded us, we couldn't have gotten to Nationals without every individual's effort working, practicing and showing throughout the year.

One of the best things about our team is that it doesn't matter if you're "pointed" or not; each person is given the same attention and held to the same standards. We all play the most important role: being an integral part of the team.

This reminds me of an interview with the drummer of U2. Most everyone knows Bono, The Edge, and Adam Clayton, the three enigmatic guys up front. But most

people can't tell you the name of poor Larry Mullen sitting in the back on the drums.

The interviewer asked, "Don't you get bored back there, doing the same thing every night while the other guys get all the glory? Do you ever mix it up just to keep it interesting?" And Mullen replied something along the lines of, "No way! That's my job. To just keep pounding a steady beat so the other guys can do what they do. The band wouldn't work as a team otherwise."

Exactly: Each member, no matter his or her level, plays a vital role on our team.

**A Common Bond**

Being at Nationals this year reminded me of what I first really recognized in Lexington and find so powerful and valuable about the IHSA program—that we, being students, riders, teammates and horse people, become like family. Win or lose, in and out of the barn, across teams and disciplines, we're all in the sport because we love it. We love horses, and we love people who love

"He's just your ride!" Coach Belinda Colgan told Hadley Benneyan of her draw, James. They placed fifth with a score of 80.

horses and spend inordinate time working with horses and with one another to excel.

One of the most poignant moments of Nationals for me wasn't in the ring, but in the stands. We shared a seating section with the University of Wisconsin-River Falls: the Skidmore Equitation girls and this Western team. On Day 1, we just sort of measured each other with wordless nods, each in our distinct get-ups. On Day 2, when the Western classes began, we instinctively became one big group—learning the subtleties of each other's disciplines, cheering on (OK, maybe screaming and whooping for) each other's riders, holding hands and waiting anxiously for results. It reminded me that IHSA is not just about showing, but about the common bond between a community of student equestrians at every level.

When I was 17 and first looking at colleges, I never imagined that I would ride at the IHSA Nationals as an individual or be on the winning National Championship team. What I've learned, as part of a team, as part of a collegiate team, is that success is a combination of some talent, a lot of hard work, and the efforts and support of those around you every day. Success is sweet. Success together is delicious.

*Hadley Benneyan, 21, of Sussex, New Jersey, is a junior at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, who is double-majoring in management/business and economics with a minor in creative writing. She'll be spending the summer in Maasbree, the Netherlands, working for a European show jumping barn. She plans to continue with a career in the horse industry post-graduation.*

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## Being Brave and Beautiful

By Abigail Carpenter



TRICIA BOOKER

Abigail Carpenter was thrilled with her sixth place aboard Irish in the Individual Walk-Trot class.

Horses have always been a fascination of mine, but I never would have thought I'd be competing in a national horse show!

I first started riding when I went to Randolph College in Lynchburg, Virginia, and took the introductory class. Toward the end of the semester, my now-coach, Chris Mitchell, asked me whether I would join the school's IHSA team to be its Walk-Trot rider. I was a little hesitant

at first, because I was just starting and didn't know if I was good enough to be on a team. Nevertheless, I agreed, and it was the best decision of my life.

I joined the equestrian team in January of 2016, not really knowing what I was getting myself into. As you all may know, February is show after show after show, and I had to go to all of them, being the only Walk-Trotter.

Five shows in 14 days was exhausting

and exhilarating at the same time. Thankfully, I got to start off the season with my first show at home. I couldn't have gotten through it without the help of my new teammates; they were so patient with me and taught me everything I know. At the end of the year, I was awarded "Most Improved" on my team. That award meant everything to me and made me realize how much I loved being a part of the team.

As sophomore year started, we gained more teammates, including another Walk-Trot rider, so I didn't show as often. However, I started learning more in my lessons. I began jumping cross-rails and even doing some riding without stirrups. Toward the end of the semester, I fell off for the first time.

It was a pretty bad fall that led to a concussion. The injury kept me from riding or doing anything, really, for a month. It was so hard for me not to be able to ride or even go out to the barn. Since it was the end of the semester, I didn't have a chance to ride before winter break. I think I was more nervous getting back in the saddle after this break than I was before my first show.

But I got back into it and got over my fears. It's still taken me a long time to be comfortable riding without stirrups again. Sometimes the fear won't go away, so I thought, 'You'll have to do it afraid.' That's just what I did, and I regained my confidence and strength.

I showed more in the spring of 2017 and was improving a lot. By the end of the semester, I only needed one more show to point up into Walk-Trot-Canter. I qualified for Zones and almost qualified for Nationals that year, but I placed third. My team was third, as well, but we sent two individual riders to IHSA Nationals.

I went to Lexington, Kentucky, and helped out last year, and it was a really fun and tiring experience. The days were long, but getting to cheer on my teammates was the best part. I really enjoyed watching them and our horses compete.

In the fall of 2017, I competed in my last Walk-Trot class at the University of



TRICIA BOOKER

GINA CARPENTER

Randolph College Coach Chris Mitchell and Assistant Coach Lauryn Tannenhaus posed with Abigail Carpenter in the winner's circle and cheered her on from the rail.

Virginia, winning first place. I finally pointed up to Walk-Trot-Canter. The next time I competed in Walk-Trot was at Regionals; I placed second, which qualified me for Zones.

Zones was a different experience altogether. In the huge, uneven outdoor ring, we all got soaked and muddy. I was especially nervous for this show. It was cold and wet, and I felt so bad for all the horses standing out there.

As I walked into the ring, Chris told me what he always does: "Go be beautiful!" So I went in, avoided the puddles, and did my best. When they announced the places, I almost couldn't believe what I heard—I'd received first place! Chris came running up to me and gave me the biggest hug, because I was going to Nationals!

We took three riders to the IHSA Nationals this time in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. It all went by so fast that I barely remember it. My parents went to support me and took so many videos and blurry pictures, but that made it so special.

As I was getting ready, I was so nervous, but I kept telling myself that I've worked

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**—ABIGAIL CARPENTER**





GINA CARPENTER

so hard for this and it will pay off. I drew a horse named Irish, whom my teammate had drawn the day before. I mounted and got in line. As I walked through the in-gate, I heard Chris say again, “Be beautiful! You have worked hard for this; now show them what you’ve got!”

As soon as I stepped into the ring, all my nerves left, and I was just there. I had the time of my life in that ring, and I wasn’t worried about what place I was going to get. They called my number for sixth place, and I couldn’t have been more honored and excited to be there after that.

I worked hard to get where I am today, but I definitely couldn’t have done it without the help of my amazing teammates and coaches. They taught me everything I know, and I couldn’t be more grateful to all of them.

I’m also thankful for all of the amazing horses I’ve had the pleasure to ride in the past three years. It’s been an incredible journey.



TRICIA BOOKER

“As I walked through the in-gate, I heard Chris say again, ‘Be beautiful!’” said Abigail Carpenter, top. Above, Carpenter (center) awaits her placing.

*Abigail Carpenter, 21, was born and raised in Danville, Virginia, and is majoring in biology with a minor in equine studies at Randolph College in Lynchburg, Virginia. This summer, she plans to work at a Boy Scout camp teaching them*

*all about horses and how to ride so they can earn their horsemanship badges. After graduating next year, she wants to work as a veterinary technician and may pursue a career in veterinary medicine. She would love to continue riding in the future.* 