



Skidmore Thoroughbreds Gallop Away with the Collegiate Cup

Makayla Benjamin adds another chapter to her family's rich IHSA story.

Story and photos by Tricia Booker

Usually, it's not difficult to identify the coaches whose teams are in contention for the IHSA Collegiate Cup Championship on the final day of competition. They're the ones standing at the rail, fingernails dug into the railing and focusing intently on their riders in the Open Flat, the last class in which to accrue points.

This year was different, however. Yes, Coach Cindy Ford of Skidmore College stood railside, but her beaming smile and relaxed demeanor told the story. Her team had leapt from the gate to an early first-day lead and went wire-to-wire, galloping down the homestretch on Saturday afternoon for the victory.

"I think we knew right from the very beginning we had a strong, strong team," she said. "I felt we had a strong team in every single division."

But as IHSA veterans know, in this format—where the luck of the draw comes into play and catch rides can catch a rider off guard—anything can happen during Nationals. This year's 51st edition was held May 3-5 at the Farm Show Complex in

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

"We're very cautiously optimistic," said Ford on Day 2, when her team's lead widened after Walk-Trot-Canter rider Alison Santucci took the top call and added 7 more points. "We're not the clear winner yet. Yesterday we had a great day, but it was Day 1. We have to get through this day and tomorrow. But this team has worked so hard, with hours of riding and just doing things such as riding without stirrups and on weekends."

Those long hours and dedication continued to pay off on the final day. Even with a late rally by defending champions Savannah College of Art and Design, the Skidmore team held the field at bay, taking the victory with 30 points over SCAD (with 28) and Stanford University (22).

"I came here with a team that I felt was a complete team," said Ford, whose Skidmore team has now achieved its eighth Collegiate Cup title and its first since 2013. "But I've come here before with complete teams and it didn't happen. Of course, you always worry about the lower-

level riders being able to manage the ring with all of those horses.

"But this year, I think we got some really exceptional draws, and everyone was physically and mentally prepared," she added. "I love working with these students who come to Skidmore bright and dedicated and hard working. It makes it fun. Sometimes you come here, and you have all that, but things don't click. Everything clicked this time, and I'm really pleased."

Out of the Gate

Skidmore started out strongly when Sheriden Beard, 20, a sophomore from Simsbury, Connecticut, won the Team Novice Equitation Over Fences on Thursday.

Beard competed last year in this class and placed sixth, so this time, the blue ribbon was particularly special—especially because she put Skidmore on top in the team standings. She also returned later to claim sixth place in the Novice Equitation on the Flat for an additional team point.

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Makayla Benjamin and Collins



Above: Skidmore College won its eighth Collegiate Cup title, with (at right) coaches Belinda Colgan, left, and Cindy Ford at the helm.

“It was pressure, but at the same time, it wasn’t—because I know I can count on my team. But I did pull through for this,” she said, smiling.

Beard drew Mount Holyoke’s Giovanni, a horse she admired, but she went into the ring knowing she needed to produce a confident ride on him.

“He was just a dream. He had stopped in the class before, but they just said to be a rider. I just had to go in there and have confidence and trust myself and just relax,” she said. “For the work-off, I knew the St. Lawrence rider, and she’s a great rider. I knew I had to be on it. I don’t know what it came down to, because she was great, too.”

Beard rode all through high school at the Ethel Walker School, along with teammate and Open rider Hannah Tucker. “I never had my own horse there, so I did IEA and some local horse shows,” she said. “Looking at colleges, I chose Skidmore for the riding team, and I knew Cindy and what she does, and it’s a great school. I’m majoring in health and human physiological sciences and hoping to become a physical therapist.”

Maeve Foley, 19, continued the Skidmore streak with the top call in the Team Intermediate Equitation on the Flat.

Foley, from Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, is a junior majoring in business with an economics minor. This was her second

appearance at the IHSA Nationals, and she drew St. Lawrence University’s Roxy, a tall bay mare with a comfortable trot.

“Roxy was perfect; she was nice and forward off my leg, and listening very well,” said Foley. “[The second direction] without stirrups was challenging, but we work on that a lot at home. I felt strong going into it.”

Assistant Coach Belinda Colgan believed that Foley’s work without stirrups clinched the class.

“For me, her posting trot without stirrups was it,” said Colgan. “Watching her ride to that point and after, she was very good—but that’s where she won it. She works very hard to be as strong as she can and rides as many horses as she can when she comes out to the barn.

“She has a lot of drive with her riding as well as academics, so it’s great. She’s a good team worker. And a special thanks to St. Lawrence for Roxy. She really showed her off, and I’m not sure Maeve would have won without her, despite all of the hard work.”

Santucci, 20, from Northville, Michigan, earned Skidmore’s third blue ribbon and 7 more points in the Team Walk-Trot-Canter class. The junior at Skidmore, who is studying neuroscience, started riding English at age 13 and arrived at Skidmore needing a bit of polish.



“As a freshman, I didn’t really have the basics; I honestly didn’t know how to canter,” she said, smiling. “So every practice was a bit of a mess. And then things started to come together my sophomore year, and then I rode for the team last year, and here I am now.”

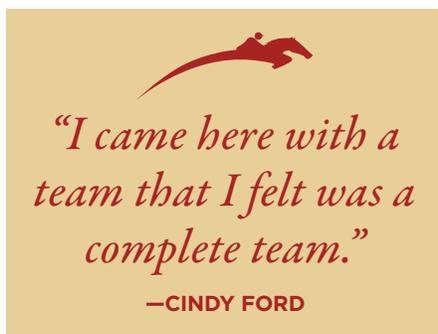
Santucci said that the difference between last year and this year is that everything started to click. “I figured out how to bend a horse and how to ride instead of sitting there looking pretty,” she said. “So it was a lot of things falling into place all at once, practicing and practicing.”

Coach Ford beamed with pride as Santucci spoke. “She has really wanted to be a rider. She’s a beautiful rider, and she really underestimates her riding,” noted Ford. “She’s had this whole team of instructors that have been on her side the whole time, and she’s worked three times as hard as we have. She’s not only a wonderful rider,

but she's also a great student academically and a great person. We're thrilled and so proud of her and the way she's progressed."

Colgan was especially proud of how Santucci handled herself in a crowded ring of 16 horses. "There were some moments when she was very stuck and crowded, and in a situation that could have been catastrophic—and she took her time and was thoughtful in how she was going to proceed, and it worked out to her advantage," she said.

Going into the third day, with the Open riders concluding the competition, Skidmore held a commanding lead; however, there were still two classes remaining.



SCAD Rallies

The three-time defending Collegiate Cup champions, Savannah College of Art and Design, still had a window of opportunity for the title entering the final day if their Open rider won both classes.

So the pressure was on the shoulders of

that rider—freshman Adam Edgar.

Edgar, who turned 19 the Tuesday after the Nationals, took it all in stride but fell just short. He claimed victory in the Open Flat and was second in the Open Over Fences but secured the reserve championship for SCAD.

"I drew Cazenovia College's Collins, and he was by far one of the most comfortable horses I've ever ridden," said Edgar of his Flat partner. "As soon as I did the sitting trot, I went, 'Whoa, this is nice.' And then I picked up the canter, and I was like, 'WHOA, this is really nice.' And I couldn't have asked for him to go any better. He was just great."

Over fences, Edgar was called in on

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Ford Keeps Motoring

Cindy Ford has been coaching Skidmore's Equestrian team for 30 years and described this year's winning team as a committed group of dedicated and talented riders. In addition to the three winning riders, Skidmore's strong contingent included Hannah Tuckner (Open Flat), Mara Chemerinsky (Intermediate Over Fences) and Julia Berger-Bailey (Walk-Trot).

"She's a very seasoned rider and has a nice look and is a great sport," said Ford of Tuckner, who also placed third in the USEF/Cacchione Cup. "She's one that has been working so hard. Hannah and Sheriden both came from the Ethel Walker School. They knew each other and rode with Hillary Rheinheimer, and she's so good with the basics. I'm so fortunate to have gotten these two beautiful riders from her, and it's just such a fit to come to Skidmore."

In the Intermediate Over Fences class, Skidmore earned 5 more points with Chemerinsky's second-placed finish.

"She's a tiny girl with a great eye, and she can ride the toughest horses or the sweetest horses," said Ford. "I sometimes feel she's almost best if she's never ridden the horse before with no preconceived notions. She gets on and rides what she has and is so strong for such a little girl."

"Julia came to us as a total beginner," said Ford with a laugh. "From the beginning, she could always ride the horses. She would get a horse to go forward by shortening her leg and kind of using her seat, so it's been so much hard work on our part and for her. She's been riding every single day and riding in a practice saddle to get everything down and long."

"And she's been riding without stirrups, and finally she has her upper body and leg where they belong. But with her, it's plain hard work. At home she's very serious, but she got here

and opened up. She learned how to clean a stall! She went out into the ring and wasn't nervous and rode her horse beautifully. She was fourth!"

Ford also credited her entire support team at Skidmore for making it all a true team effort.

"I'm so fortunate. I have Belinda Colgan and Karen Hurff. Belinda's my assistant coach and Karen is one of our instructors. And Karen in particular does a great job finishing them off on the flat. She has that dressage background, teaches them to get a horse round in a classical way and not an artificial way. She teaches them that feel and gives them that seat and leg."

"So I have this advantage that I have those two, who do an amazing job and support everything we do," she continued. "It's just such a team of instructors. I'm not just a single coach who's coaching these riders. There's a group of us, including Amanda Wadsworth, and the four of us talk to each other. There are no egos. Amanda had to stay home because we couldn't all come. But it's a team effort with the instructors as well as the students."

Ford has coached the Saratoga Springs, New York-based college to the Collegiate Cup win seven times as a coach, with many other top-four team placings.

"It's been a really good run. So it's been '90, '91, '95, '96, '99, 2010, '13 and now," she noted. "Skidmore backs us up. Our athletic director has been calling, and the school's president dropped me a note earlier. We're a varsity team and well respected within the college, and a major part of Skidmore. We're proud to be there and delighted to win the Collegiate Cup for Skidmore once again."



Centenary University's Michael Andrade won the Individual Open Fences class, above, and freshman Adam Edgar, of Savannah College of Art and Design, helped his team clinch second place with victory in the Team Open Flat and second in the Team Open Fences.

top to test, but a brilliant effort by Boston University's Michael Janson moved him up for the blue ribbon. Nevertheless, it was an impressive effort on Edgar's part, and SCAD Coach Ashley Henry was thrilled. Edgar arrived at SCAD after a successful Junior career with trainers Bill Schaub and Ken and Emily Smith.

"Adam is a beautiful Hunter rider and a natural rider," said Henry, adding that their focus was not to overdo the equitation training and allow Edgar's true ability shine through.

Edgar, of Leesburg, Virginia, started riding when he was in elementary school and then took a working student position with Schaub at Over The Hill Farm during his high school years.

Henry noticed Edgar while watching a video of a horse on Facebook and wondered who he was. After some research, she messaged him and invited him to SCAD.

"At first I was like, 'I don't want to go to art school.' And I went and visited and saw the barn and thought, 'I can't go anywhere else,'" said Edgar. "I've been doing the IHSA, and it's been a whirlwind but super fun. Coming to SCAD was one of the best decisions I ever made, and I'm super thankful for everyone who has put

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The Best and Favorite Horses



Cazenovia College's Collins, a 16.3-hand bay gelding, earned the Triple Crown High-Point Hunt Seat Horse Award. Skidmore College's Clay, a 16.3-hand dark bay gelding, received the SmartPak Most Popular Hunt Seat Horse Award.

2018 IHSA Hunt Seat Equitation Champions

Walk-Trot

Team—Jillian Rogers, Stanford University (California)

Individual—Alessandro Lorenzoni, Wesleyan University (Connecticut)

Walk-Trot-Canter

Team—Alison Santucci, Skidmore College (New York)

Individual—Carol Hayes, University of Florida

Novice Flat

Team—Brady Martino, Savannah College of Art and Design (Georgia)

Individual—Molly Murtha, University of Central Florida

Novice Fences

Team—Sheriden Beard, Skidmore College (New York)

Individual—Marcus Livermore, Morrisville State College (New York)

Intermediate Flat

Team—Maeve Foley, Skidmore College (New York)

Individual—Emily Wilmot, Delaware Valley University (Pennsylvania)

Intermediate Fences

Team—Sara Hearn, Mount Holyoke College (Massachusetts)

Individual—Jennifer DePietro, Johnson & Wales University (Rhode Island)

Open Flat

Team—Adam Edgar, Savannah College of Art and Design (Georgia)

Individual—Caroline Molther, University of Kentucky

Open Fences

Team—Michael Janson, Boston University (Massachusetts)

Individual—Michael Andrade, Centenary University (New Jersey)

Alumni Flat

Individual—Stephanie Zimicki, Alfred University (New York)

Alumni Fences

Individual—Chelsea Koerper, Delaware Valley University (Pennsylvania)

USEF/Cacchione Cup Top 10



Makyla Benjamin, Sweet Briar College (Virginia)
 Mollie Kowalchik, Mount Holyoke College (Massachusetts)
 Hannah Tuckner, Skidmore College (New York)
 Elizabeth Traban, Penn State University (Pennsylvania)
 Sarah Gordon, Savannah College of Art and Design (Georgia)

Skylar Laakso, Centenary University (New Jersey)
 Halle Kutsche, Kansas State University (Kansas)
 Cary Hundley, Goucher College (Maryland)
 Melanie Lathrop, Colorado State University (Colorado)
 Alicia Weismann, Rider University (New Jersey)



Above: Three-time defending Collegiate Cup champions Savannah College of Art and Design earned the reserve championship, above. At right: Cacchione Cup winner Makayla Benjamin celebrated with, from left, parents Andy and Jan Benjamin, Purdue Coach Jerry Steinmetz and Bob Cacchione.

effort into this and made it possible—my coaches, our personal trainer at home, yoga instructor. Every last ounce of work really counts and leads into this. I'm so thankful and so lucky."

Henry said she had a younger team this year compared to years past, which was a new and different challenge but one she enjoys.

"It was really exciting to get Adam to come to SCAD and get him on the team this year," she said. "A lot of people coming into this day know the amount of pressure, so we don't talk about it. But Adam said, 'Tell me. I ride well under pressure.' So, that was nice to have. You have an upper level rider, and you can tell him, 'OK, everything's on your shoulders, and we need you to win both classes.'"

"And it was really close. I couldn't have asked for a better ride. To come back in the work-off on top and then winning that Flat was beyond exciting for us as a team. So I'm very proud of him and to see what this little 'Bee' grows into."



Conceiving a Cacchione Victory

Many riders who participate in the IHSA program grow to consider their fellow riders and coaches a part of their family. But for Makayla Benjamin, that concept goes one step further—her parents, Jan and Andy Benjamin, met while they were on Purdue University's IHSA team, and the rest, as they say, is family history.

Benjamin added to her parents' IHSA story by taking home the Cacchione Cup during her senior year at Sweet Briar College in Virginia. Although she'd ridden on the school's IHSA team throughout college, this was the first year she'd qualified for Nationals. Of course, both of her parents went to cheer her on and reunite with their

former coach, Jerry Steinmetz.

"My mom was a freshman on the team, and my dad was a senior, and they did Western and English," she said. "They never made it to Nationals, which I didn't find out until I was here. I met Jerry for the first time here, but we had talked about him, and I knew him from Facebook. Jerry is a good friend to know and show you the ropes at Nationals."

"It was really fun to come here and see how the sport has progressed," Benjamin added. "My parents are on the IHSA Memory Wall (of photographs) as well, and it was fun to say, 'Wow! That's you guys on the team back in the day!'"

Benjamin drew Cazenovia's Sun Bear for the over-fences phase of the Cacchione Cup



Theresa L. McDonald 2018 Scholarship Challenge Winners

and placed third with a score of 83. A 79 on the flat aboard Gunnar dropped her to eighth, but judges Diane Carney and Tony Sgarlata chose to test the top 10 the following day, as just 11 points separated the group.

“So I was really happy to come back and test,” said Benjamin. “Then I was even happier when it was over fences because I was like, ‘I can do this! Over fences is my strong suit.’”

The testing phase was run in reverse order, so Benjamin returned third aboard another Cazenovia horse named Collins. The course of 10 fences, which included two trot jumps, offered riders the opportunity to make some different decisions regarding striding as well as turns.

“I was unsure of the turn after fence 7. People had been going left, but the right turn seemed like it would flow more, but it’s a handier turn to get to the trot fence,” she explained of her strategy. “So that was a game-time decision once I found out what horse I’d drawn to know how he schooled and if he’d be OK with that blind turn, really. And the coach with Cazenovia was very generous and was like, ‘Oh, yes, he’s game for it all.’ Just keep your leg on and you’ll be fine, so that’s what I did.”

Benjamin had planned to jump the first bending line in seven strides, but

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Other Awards



IHSA National Sportsmanship Awards

Coach—Michael Dowling, Centenary University
 Student—Skylar Laakso, Centenary University
 Volunteer—Rebecca Jacobsen

Megan Taylor received the 2018 IHSA Lifetime Achievement Award. Taylor has been around the IHSA for nearly her entire life and was the director of riding and head coach of the Sewanee Equestrian Program (Tennessee) for more than 16 years. She served as an IHSA regional president for more than 14 years and became the national director of the IHSA Alumni Association in 2014. She is currently the Alumni Director-at-Large.

Brianne Lenehan of Clemson University (South Carolina) won the Theresa L. McDonald 2018 Scholarship Challenge, sponsored by EQUUS Magazine.



Left, Boston University's Michael Janson performed a work-off that impressed judges Diane Carney and Tony Sgarlata for top call in the Team Open Fences. Above: Alison Santucci won the Team Walk-Trot-Canter class to help Skidmore claim the Collegiate Cup.

it came up as eight. She was especially pleased with her first trot jump but then expressed concern about fence 7, the option where riders could choose a tight rollback left or a smooth right-hand turn to the trot fence at 8.

"After my test, I was skeptical," she admitted. "I thought, 'I hope they don't penalize me for that eight strides because it was right out of the rhythm.' Then he was a little sticky off the ground at fence 7, and I was like, 'I don't know how sticky that was because it was away from the judges, but I don't know how they'll treat that.' I felt I definitely stayed in eighth. Then, as I was watching everyone else go around, I thought I'd handled the course pretty well. It posed a lot of questions, and I answered most of them right. I was shocked I was top three, let alone the winner."

Judges Carney and Sgarlata posted the Cacchione work-off course the day before the testing phase so riders could study it and allowed them to draw their horses rather than assign specific mounts.

They were both highly impressed with Benjamin's ride.

"The girl who ended up winning came back early, and she rode the test beautifully," said Carney. "She has a good position and has good horse IQ. She had a great plan, too. She did what she could for herself coming back early as she did, since they returned low scores to high. The other riders had to either step up and do the same or, as it showed, it didn't happen. There was one rider who was close, and she rode well. We scored the work-off

separately and let the math decide the winner. It was that simple."

Benjamin, 21, from Leesburg, Virginia, is graduating with a degree in mathematical economics with a double minor in business and engineering. She had a background in Equitation as a junior, participated in the USHJA Emerging Athletes Program and competed on the Sweet Briar IHSA team for four years.

"We changed Regions this year, and I think that really helped," she said. "And I had some experience going to Zones, so I was more familiar with how everything worked. It was my first year going to Zones for the Cacchione Cup, though, so I wasn't quite sure how that worked. But I went in to ride the horse I had every time and was lucky enough that it was good."

After graduation, Benjamin will travel to Wyoming for the summer where she'll work at the Bitter Root Ranch as a wrangler. "I'm going to have fun out there for 4½ months and then start my corporate job in February of next year at Ferguson, so I'll do sales and logistics for their corporate side. I'll do their sales trainee pro-

"What a vision they had 51 years ago for the IHSA. It's a terrific program, and I can't say enough good about it."
—JUDGE TONY SGARLATA



Clockwise from top: A rider enters the arena; Team Novice Flat winner Brady Martino of Savannah College of Art and Design; Individual Novice Flat winner Molly Murtha of the University of Central Florida; Individual Walk-Trot-Canter winner Carol Hayes of the University of Florida

gram for a year and see where it goes.”

Sgarlata, who has frequently judged IHSA shows but not the Nationals, said they were really looking for smoothness all week.

“She had a terrific plan and stuck with it. She was very smooth,” he said of Benjamin. “So many of them were close in that class. Overall, those top 10 were in a span of maybe 11 points. It could have been anyone’s class.”

Carney, also judging the IHSA Na-

tionals for the first time, said she and Sgarlata were looking on the same page while judging.

“Our horsemanship is so similar, and we were looking for smooth and straight. It sounds so basic,” said Carney. “On these horses we’re looking for a good plan and a good position. And the courses were great all week. The gentleman who did the courses (Tom Hern, Jr.) did a fabulous job.

“We were in the spirit of each level for

each class,” she continued. “We tried to give them a little bit to do in each test, and they seemed to like the tests. I’ve judged a couple of IHSA shows, and I’m honored to be here at the championship, and it’s always a pleasure to judge with Tony.”

Sgarlata concurred. “What a vision they had 51 years ago for the IHSA. It’s a terrific program, and I can’t say enough good about it. This has been a wonderful experience.”