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UNH dressage team wins national title

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DURHAM — If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

With that in mind, the University of New Hampshire dressage team captured the school's first ever national championship this past weekend at the University of Findlay in Findlay, Ohio.

Representing the Wildcats was senior captain Kim Guyer in the first level division, senior Kat Williams-Barnard in the upper training division, senior Bridget Shea in the lower training division, and junior Casey Hoatson in the intro division.

The UNH dressage team consists of 14 members, however the riders with the most points in their division represent the team at nationals.

The Wildcats' win marks the first time in history that the Intercollegiate Dressage Association national championship has been won by a state university; all other winners having been private institutions. All



Courtesy photo The UNH dressage team includes, from left, Casey Hoatson (Lower Training), Kaetryn Williams-Barnard (Upper Training), Sarah Hamilton (Coach), Bridget Shea (Intro), and Kim Guyer (1st level).

team members received commemorative saddles along with the championship trophy, and UNH was awarded a \$1,000 scholarship to be given to the general scholarship fund.

"It's a great feeling to accomplish something we've been working so hard for," coach Sarah Hamilton said. "Coming so close last year made everyone want it that much more this time around."

The Wildcats finished fourth in last year's National Intercollegiate Dressage Association Competition, and represented the Northeast region in 2007's IDA Nationals as well.

After winning three straight regional championships, Hamilton and company are ecstatic to finally bring the national hardware back to Durham.

"Having watched other schools win the past couple years, it was almost surreal to be the team getting presented with ribbons and saddles," said Guyer. "It was just an unbelievable feeling."

"The recent success has a lot to do with our coach," Guyer added. "She's an incredibly positive influence on everyone."

After graduation in May, Guyer hopes to compete in second level dressage with one of her own horses.

The Wildcats were one of the top 12 regional qualifiers from across the nation that competed this past weekend.

"Winning the championship was definitely our goal after making it to nationals the past three years in a row," Hamilton said. "The girls performed absolutely amazing, and this will be something they never forget for the rest of their lives. I'm exceptionally proud of all the riders who've competed on our team this year. The four riders who competed at nationals were not only strong competitors, but great team players as well."

For those unfamiliar with the sport of dressage, it can be likened to ballet for the horse and rider, or compulsory events in gymnastics.

Riders strive to systematically develop and improve the horse's strength, flexibility, balance, gait and movement to create a harmonious partnership between the horse and rider, with invisible communication. Many are not aware that dressage is an Olympic sport.

Intercollegiate dressage competition has the added challenge that the rider must perform on an unfamiliar horse. In a true test of skill, riders draw horses at random and have just 10 minutes to establish a harmonious relationship with the animal before they perform.

Guyer, 21, has been riding horses since she was 6, and competing in dressage since her freshman year of high school. A native of Northborough, Mass., Guyer fell in love with dressage after taking it up at a local barn.

"I remember being interested right when I saw it offered," she said. "The development of the sport is what I love. Things like working with the horse to develop correct form and movement. It's challenging, but rewarding at the same time."

The Wildcats captured the national championship due to strong performances from all four team members.

"At nationals there is no dropped score, so every rider must push for their very best performance," Hamilton said.

With the pressure on, each rider placed in the top four of their division, securing the title for UNH.

Guyer finished fourth, Williams-Barnard received third, Hoatson placed first (received Reserve Champion Highpoint Rider Award), and Shea also received third.

"To have every rider in the top four is an amazing accomplishment in such a fierce and high-caliber competition," Hamilton added.

Two riders also found success in individual competition (must qualify at regionals), as Hoatson finished eighth, and Shea finished third.

A 21-year-old native of York, Maine, Hoatson pointed to dedication and training as the reason UNH now sits above the rest.

"We all put so much into this, and worked so hard," she said. "Constantly working with different horses in practice went a long way in helping us achieve what we did. We all just said, 'Hey, it's our time to shine.'"

Members of the UNH dressage team which did not compete at nationals include: Adrianna LaFave (first level division), Hillary Feldman (Upper training), Ila Morrison (Upper training), Emily Moeller (Upper training), Sarah Asadorian (Lower training), Korie Boissoneau (Lower training), Lisa Moskul (Lower training), Patty Muench (Lower training), Erin Yuhas (Intro), and Alison McGee (Intro).

The UNH dressage team is self-funded, and conducts fundraisers throughout the year to pay for competitions and needed expenses.

For more information about the UNH dressage team, as well as all other questions about the UNH equestrian program, visit www.equine.unh.edu

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