

Equestrian Team Spurs Spirit At Nationals

NEWARK, Del. — Jen Midiri, captain of the University of Delaware equestrian team and a junior in the College of Agricultural Sciences, had made it to the big time.

Earlier this month, inside a Colorado stadium, hundreds of people waited to watch the animal science major compete against some of the best riders in the country. It was enough to give anyone butterflies, even someone like Midiri who has been riding horses for 16 of her 21 years.

But just before she mounted her horse, Midiri looked down at the silly smiley face scrawled on her hand and couldn't help but smile back. All the UD team members had similar purple faces inked on their hands, and suddenly, Midiri

didn't feel quite so alone in that cavernous arena.

All the lucky smiley faces — and lucky socks and pennies, too — had paid off for the University of Delaware's equestrian team. The 65-member squad had won an invitation to the National Intercollegiate Equestrian Championships, held in Fort Collins, Colo. The nationals brought together the very best of collegiate teams, and by the end of the weekend-long event, UD had earned a very respectable 10th overall out of 19 teams participating.

Not a bad showing for a team who had been in the basement in their regional standings just three years earlier.

On a recent wind-whipped af-

temoon, Midiri and club president Linda Pill, also a student in the College of Agricultural Sciences, laughed at the recollection of a fellow member running around in Colorado with her purple pen, checking to make sure everyone had a smiley face. But while they enjoy joking about the team's assorted amulets and charms, it's readily apparent that luck has had little to do with this team's success.

Riding is a sport that engages both body and brain. It calls upon an individual's coordination, strength, logic and judgment. At collegiate equestrian competitions, participants are given mounts at random. Within minutes, the rider has to become acclimated to a new horse and must think quickly and act decisively.

But riding also is about heart: attitude, effort, persistence. And when it comes to heart, the University of Delaware equestrian

team beats the competition hands-down.

"Even the judges in Colorado noticed our team's spirit," said Pill.

"We were the loudest, most obnoxious bunch there, by far," said Midiri with a chuckle.

This close-knit group was enthusiastic despite knowing that they were going into nationals as the underdogs. After all, UD was competing against some very well-trained and well-equipped teams from schools with long histories of equestrian excellence. In contrast, the 15-year-old UD team never had a coach until this year, and must travel to a distance to the trainer for weekly practices. But the work pays off for all. There are no bench-warmers on this team.

"Other collegiate teams have cuts or have a first-string and a second-string line-up, but we be-

lieve it's important that every member gets an opportunity to ride," said Pill. "Commitment to the team, as well as ability, is what matters."

This sorority of riders — all the members are female this year — share an intense camaraderie and kinship. In fact, when it came time for six of Delaware's riders to represent the team at nationals, 18 fellow members paid more than \$400 each to fly to Colorado to cheer them on.

The Equestrian team already has its sights set on the 1996 nationals to be held at the former Olympics site in Los Angeles. However, Midiri doesn't want to see club members get too fixated on that goal.

"We don't want to lose sight of why we are doing this," said Midiri. "We are here to learn, to have fun, to make memories."

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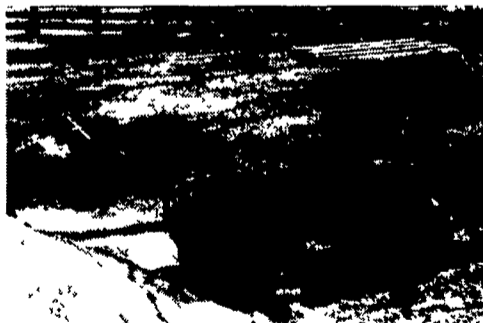


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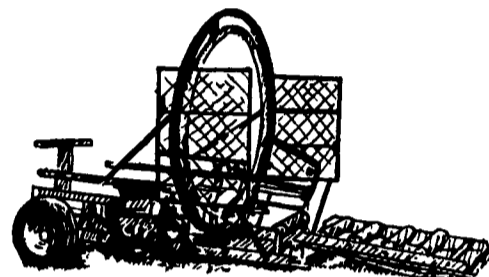
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