

Getting on Track: How to Become a Potential Candidate For a College Varsity Equestrian team

Part I: Advice for High School Freshmen & Sophomores

If you're about to enter your freshman or sophomore year in high school, the following steps are suggested if you wish to get on track toward becoming a candidate for a college with an NCAA-sanctioned riding team – i.e., a team that's a member of the Varsity Equestrian system:

Step 1: Consult the Varsity Equestrian website (found at varsityequestrian.com) to learn general information about Varsity Equestrian, and to review information on the colleges that offer NCAA-sanctioned equestrian teams.

Step 2: If possible, attend a Varsity Equestrian competition in your area to get a better idea of what the Varsity Equestrian format is all about.

Step 3: Download or order a copy of the National Collegiate Athletic Association "Guide for the College-Bound Student-Athlete" (found at ncaapublications.com) to become familiar with the NCAA and to review the list of courses that are *required* to meet the organization's criteria by the time of high school graduation. Consult your high school guidance counselor about getting on track toward becoming a Varsity Equestrian recruit, as these counselors usually have vast experience (from other sports) in navigating the often bewildering and overwhelming volume of NCAA rules and information.

Step 4: Alert your trainer of your interest in Varsity Equestrian schools, and give him/her information on the Varsity Equestrian system so he/she can help and support you as you move through the recruiting process.

Step 5: Organize your horse-show records – specifically, start making a list of year-end awards and/or seasonal show highlights, and update it regularly. Also, from 9th grade forward, start keeping a very detailed accounting of all prize money won and expenses incurred at horse shows, which includes saving and organizing all receipts. (More on prize money vs. expenses at the end of Part VII in this document.)

Step 6: Know that while at any time you can send an email or letter to a Varsity Equestrian coach, make a phone call to that coach or go on a campus visit, a Varsity Equestrian coach is not permitted to contact you during your freshman and sophomore years in high school. (More on this in Part IV.)

Step 7: Keep up your grades at school, and take the PSAT more than once (if possible) as a good practice test for the SAT and ACT. Academic performance is a *very* important factor in Varsity Equestrian recruiting.

Step 8: Keep riding, learning and showing as much as possible!

Part II: Advice for High School Juniors & Seniors; also College Transfers

If you're about to enter your junior or senior year in high school, or if you're a current college student planning to transfer to a Varsity Equestrian school, the following steps are suggested if you wish to get on track toward becoming a potential candidate for a college with an NCAA-sanctioned riding team – i.e., a team that's a member of the Varsity Equestrian system:

Step 1: Review and follow all the steps outlined in Part I of this document.

Step 2: Register online with the NCAA Eligibility Center – formerly known as the NCAA Clearinghouse (found at <https://web1.ncaa.org/eligibilitycenter/common/>). This is a very important requirement!

Step 3: Explore all the colleges with links on the Varsity Equestrian website (found at varsityequestrian.com) and narrow down your choices of schools to which you desire to apply. (See Part III for suggestions on this step.)

Step 4: Go to the individual websites of the Varsity Equestrian colleges of interest to answer their respective online Equestrian Athlete Questionnaires. This preliminary step is very important!

Step 5: Start taking the SAT and ACT in the fall of your junior year, to allow plenty of opportunities for possible retakes when dates are offered. When registering online for these tests, be sure to check the box requesting that a copy of your test results be sent directly to the Varsity Equestrian colleges to which you'd like to apply – *and* check the box requesting that a copy of your results be sent to the NCAA Eligibility Center (which has its own designated code of 9999). These steps are both mandatory if you wish to remain in the Varsity Equestrian application system!

Step 6: Start compiling footage for a video of your riding abilities. (More advice on that process in Part V.)

Step 7: Create a one-page riding resume that includes highlights from your horse-show experience – including year-end awards won, and any other significant equestrian honors or achievements earned during the past several years. Also on this riding resume, list the names and contact information for the trainers with whom you've ridden during the past five years; the names of any outside clinicians with whom you've ridden; and your membership ID numbers for USEF, AQHA, NRHA, APHA and any other applicable local, state, regional, or national horse-show organizations to which you belong.

Step 8: Create a one-page *non-riding* resume that includes any academic achievements, honors or awards; also list your participation in volunteerism, extra-curricular activities, leadership, community involvement, part-time jobs, organizational memberships, etc. – from 9th grade through the present.

Step 9: Review the NCAA Rulebook (found at ncaa.org – click on "Legislation & Governance," then "Rules & Bylaws," then "Division I Manual") and be sure to read Bylaw/Article 12 – Amateurism; Bylaw/Article 13 – Recruiting; and Bylaw/Article 14 – Eligibility. Along the way, familiarize yourself with such terms as Divisions I, II and III; also Equivalency Sports, Compliance, Official Visit, Unofficial Visit, National Letter of Intent, Signing Dates, Dead Periods, Walk-On Athletes, and Tryouts. These are all *very* important terms to know!

Step 10: Consult the varsityequestrian.com website for individual Varsity Equestrian schools that offer summer riding camps. This experience can offer a very hands-on glimpse into what it's like to ride at the varsity level, even if the host school isn't one in which you'd necessarily be interested in attending – and you can pick up lots of helpful information, too.

Step 11: Ask your high school guidance counselor to mail copies of your junior-year transcript to the admissions offices *and* to the coaches at the Varsity Equestrian colleges of your choice. Be sure your counselor mails a copy to the NCAA Eligibility Center as well. These transcripts *must* be sent directly from your school; not from you.

Step 12: Compile a list of questions to ask Varsity Equestrian coaches during college visits.

Step 13: No later than the summer leading into your senior year, start mailing your packets of personal information (cover letter, riding resume, academic resume and riding video) to coaches at the Varsity Equestrian colleges that most interest you. You can start mailing these materials as early as any time during your junior year.

Step 14: The summer leading into your senior year, start applying to the Varsity Equestrian colleges that interest you. Many Varsity Equestrian colleges have a "rolling admissions" policy – so you might receive news of your acceptance status in as little time as 30 days.

Part III: Advice for Narrowing Down Choices

This list of elements to consider when narrowing down college choices is presented with widely-shared advice from Varsity Equestrian coaches that first and foremost, a candidate should choose a college for its

academic offerings and overall appeal – and she should regard the existence of a Varsity Equestrian team simply as a bonus element:

Element 1: An offering of academic programs and potential major/minor categories that fit your interests.

Element 2: A geographic location that's appealing in terms of both climate and distance from home.

Element 3: An enrollment size that would feel comfortable to you.

Element 4: Annual tuition/room/board/textbook/travel costs that fit your family's personal budget in case scholarship funds (of any kind) do *not* become available.

Element 5: A very thorough, personal visit to campus that leaves you with a feel-good impression at all levels.

Element 6: The existence of a Varsity Equestrian team with a roster of individual athlete profiles/histories that seem reasonably compatible with your own riding and showing experience.

Part IV: Q&A on Going Beyond the Basic Steps

Q: When a candidate has completed the Equestrian Athlete Questionnaire on the respective websites of the Varsity Equestrian colleges she might be interested in, should she wait to see if she hears back from coaches? Or should she go ahead and mail her video, riding resume, academic resume and cover letter to the coaches of the schools she favors?

A: The candidate should commence with sending all of the above-mentioned personal materials, regardless of whether she hears back from a Varsity Equestrian coach following submission of her questionnaire. Those personal materials can be submitted to coaches any time during the candidate's high school years, although junior year is recommended. It's also recommended that if a candidate hasn't received a response to her personal information within 14 days or so, she should follow up with an email or call to the coach (or coach's assistant) to inquire about her current status. This not only confirms that the candidate's personal materials were routed to the right place, but also conveys her continued level of interest to the coach.

Q: At what point in a candidate's high school years is she advised to make initial contact with coaches at Varsity Equestrian colleges to which she might wish to apply?

A: Summer is usually the least-busy period for Varsity Equestrian coaches, and thus ideal for devoting time to reviewing videos and resumes. However, any time during the candidate's junior year is recommended for initial contact with Varsity Equestrian coaches – either by email, letter, phone call or campus visit – as long as those methods of contact are initiated by the candidate and not by the coach. In terms of correspondence, it's important to know that email and letters are the only NCAA-authorized means by which varsity coaches can respond to a candidate's query, prior to July 1 leading into the candidate's senior year in high school – and the original email or letter must be initiated by the candidate. (Coaches are permitted to mail informational/promotional packets to a candidate at any time after Sept. 1 of the candidate's junior year.) After July 1 leading into the candidate's senior year, coaches are allowed to initiate personal letters and/or make phone calls to a candidate (and to return phone calls, as well) – but the coaches are limited to one weekly call per candidate. Text-messaging between coaches and candidates is not permitted at any time during the recruiting process.

Q: When a candidate makes initial contact with a Varsity Equestrian coach, what method is usually recommended – i.e., email, letter, phone call, etc.?

A: After submitting the Equestrian Athlete Questionnaire, a follow-up email to the coach is recommended – with personal material (video, resume, etc.) mailed separately. In these initial emails, candidates are advised to let coaches know what high school year they're currently in, so the coaches will know if there are any restrictions on the method of their response.

Q: Once a candidate has established contact with a Varsity Equestrian coach, should she continue to update the coach on her riding progress and accomplishments? And if so, how often should she submit updates?

A: After a candidate has submitted her video and resume, she may hear back from certain Varsity Equestrian coaches who express an interest in keeping her on their radar, so to speak. In those cases, the candidate should continue to update those coaches (via email) on her riding progress and accomplishments – as well as letting coaches know of specific upcoming horse shows (and their dates/locations) in which she will be competing, in case coaches want to come and watch her ride. A bi-monthly or monthly update to coaches is suggested.

Q: At what point is it recommended that a candidate make a personal campus visit to a Varsity Equestrian college in which she's interested?

A: Under NCAA rules, if a candidate wishes to make an "unofficial" visit (i.e., the candidate covers all of her own travel expenses), she is welcome to visit a Varsity Equestrian campus at any time during her high school years – although junior year is recommended. On those unofficial visits, the candidate is permitted to make an appointment to meet with the Varsity Equestrian coach, but the meeting must take place on campus. However, if a candidate is formally invited by a Varsity Equestrian coach to make an "official" visit (i.e., the host college covers some or all of the candidate's travel expenses), she cannot make that official visit until after the first day of her senior year in high school. Under NCAA rules, candidates are permitted to accept up to five official visits (to five different varsity colleges) during their senior year. While a candidate may wish to make a campus visit during her high school's spring break, coaches caution that this may not always be the best time – as Varsity Equestrian colleges often are at the height of their spring competition season during that period.

Q: When a candidate is planning a Varsity Equestrian campus visit, what other arrangements should she consider making for the time she's there?

A: On an unofficial visit, it's always recommended that a candidate call ahead to schedule a campus tour, a meeting with Admissions, and an appointment with an academic advisor in the area(s) of study that most interest her. On an official visit, usually the hosting coach will schedule all of those tours and meetings for the candidate. Official visits only allow the candidate to remain on campus for up to 48 hours – so her time there needs to be mapped out efficiently and productively. But whether the visit is unofficial or official, it's always advisable to go while regular classes are in session – to get a better feel for the school, and to possibly have a chance to watch a practice session of the equestrian team.

Q: When a candidate visits a prospective Varsity Equestrian college, is it recommended that a parent accompany her to meetings with the coach?

A: Typically, parents are encouraged to attend meetings between coaches and their daughter, but they're advised to simply listen rather than talk. This allows the coach to get a crucial feel for the candidate's personality, and to allow the candidate an opportunity to ask her own questions. Toward the end of such meetings, parents usually are welcome to ask any questions that might not have already been addressed.

Q: How realistic is it to expect an offer of an athletic scholarship from a Varsity Equestrian college?

Scholarship criteria vary from institution to institution, but it should be noted that not every Varsity Equestrian athlete is awarded scholarship funds. A select few receive full scholarships, and some receive partial scholarships. Many Varsity Equestrian riders do not receive any type of athletic scholarship – but they might be eligible for partial (or full) academic scholarships, either from the respective colleges or from outside entities. Also, at some colleges, an athlete who starts on a Varsity Equestrian team as a walk-on might earn an athletic scholarship over time as she continues to improve her riding, maintains a satisfactory academic standard and exhibits a hard-work ethic toward the team.

DO (for Hunter Seat) show examples of flat work – including basic dressage-type maneuvers such as circles, sitting trot, halt transitions, lateral movements and no-stirrup work; and jumping – including footage of some horse-show rounds, but also clips from informal practice at your home barn such as bending lines and equitation turns. As much as possible, display how you ride a horse on the bit. For Western Horsemanship, include clips from some of your horse shows, along with practice footage showing the walk, jog, extended jog and lope in both directions; also some practice patterns. For Western Reining, include clips from some horse shows, along with footage of reining maneuvers from your practices or lessons.

DO wear breeches, tall boots and a snug-fitting tucked-in shirt for Hunter Seat; and jeans, boots, chaps and an appropriate fitted shirt for Western.

DO show examples of riding at least three different horses – and indicate (with video captions) each horse's age and the current level of its showing or training. Riding a variety of horse types is suggested – for example, don't be afraid to show how you handle a very green horse.

DO use a DVD format, if possible. (Having dubs made of a master DVD usually only costs a few dollars each, and they're less expensive and bulky than VHS tapes to mail.) If using a VHS format, check with the colleges' respective athletic departments ahead of time to make sure they have the equipment to view VHS tapes.

DON'T forget to attach your name and all your contact information to your video case, as well as in an opening video caption.

DON'T make your video any longer than 15 minutes.

DON'T add background music, unless it's unobtrusively neutral and of moderate volume.

DON'T expect your video to be returned to you – unless you include a self-addressed, sufficiently stamped envelope for that purpose.

Part VI: "Do's and Don'ts for Writing a Cover Letter

DO tell the coach all the reasons why you are interested in that particular college, and why you are interested in her his/her team.

DO conduct some research on the college's team history and dynamic – and mention some specifics in your letter that show the coach you've done that research.

DO be sure all of your contact information (phone numbers, mailing address and email) is included in your letter – as well as your current class year (grade level) in school.

DON'T make the letter more than a few short paragraphs.

DON'T send the letter without double-checking your spelling and grammar!

Part VII: What Advice Do You Have for Hunter Seat Riders Who...

...already have considerable experience showing in the Hunter divisions, but little or no experience in Equitation?

Given the equitation-driven format of Varsity Equestrian, riders with a strong equitation background almost always have a distinct advantage when it comes to being recruited for some of the top spots on Varsity Equestrian teams. Jumper experience also is helpful, as show-jumping and equitation share some similar elements. But a rider whose background is strictly in the hunters might exhibit an effective-enough basic equitation seat on her video that a coach will take a chance and sign her – or at least encourage her to try out for a walk-on position. Riders whose experience mostly consists of three-day eventing, dressage or Pony Club might also manage to catch a coach's eye, for the same reason. For

those riders with little or no equitation experience, some coaches suggest taking a lesson or two from a reputable equitation specialist. Enlist someone to film these lessons, then splice together a variety of highlights on a 15-minute video. This can be submitted separately from the candidate's original video, and it not only demonstrates a candidate's ability to learn and be effective at equitation, but also expresses the candidate's desire to work hard in this discipline.

...live in states or regions where there is very little offered in the way of Equitation and/or Medal classes at horse shows, even at USEF A-rated events?

If a candidate's primary goal is to land a Varsity Equestrian scholarship (and not just a walk-on position), it is recommended that she do whatever it takes to bolster her equitation experience and skills. To that end, she may wish to purchase, lease or catch-ride an equitation horse and travel to the longer-distance shows offering equitation classes that traditionally draw substantial entries. Or, she might follow the advice (in the answer above) of taking an equitation lesson and submitting a video of that lesson.

...live in states or regions where there aren't many USEF A-level shows offered, and/or whose budgets limit them to riding exclusively in local, non-rated shows?

If a candidate has little or no experience on the A-rated show circuit, yet she's been riding a wide variety of horses at her barn (or catch-riding elsewhere), and has been successfully showing in the upper-level divisions at non-rated competitions for a long time, there definitely are some Varsity Equestrian teams where she might easily fit in as a walk-on – which comes with all the practice, prestige and perks of team membership, sans scholarship funds. Over time, she might work her way up (through diligent effort and learning) to ride in team competitions.

...have earned significant amounts of prize money at the upper levels of show-jumping – since this could potentially nullify their NCAA amateur status?

Under NCAA rules, Varsity Equestrian recruits will be classified as amateurs only if the prize money won at any given competition prior to college does not exceed the amount of a prescribed list of expenses incurred at that competition – and those expenses are limited to entry fees, gasoline, meals, lodging, stall, feed and hauling. Candidates who compete in the more lucrative jumper divisions (or in the newly-formed USHJA Hunter Derbies and/or other high-level hunter classics) are advised, from 9th grade forward, to keep well-organized records and detailed receipts of their earnings and expenses. If a candidate is determined to seek a spot on a Varsity Equestrian team in college, she's urged to keep an ongoing close eye on the balance between those two columns. A candidate who competes at the more lucrative show-jumping or hunter levels might consider the viable option of requesting a reduced payout of prize money at any given show, in an amount that doesn't exceed her expenses. (Horse-show secretaries are becoming well-acquainted with NCAA rules regarding prize money, and most are very willing to work with an exhibitor to adjust her payouts.) If a candidate finds herself with an overall record of more prize money than expenses at the time she applies for NCAA eligibility, she's advised to consult the compliance officer at the college of her interest. These officers, who are on the athletic-department staffs at all Varsity Equestrian schools, usually will work with potential recruits on applying for reinstatement in the NCAA, if necessary.

Helpful Links

Varsity Equestrian – varsityequestrian.com
National Collegiate Athletic Association – ncaa.org
National Letter of Intent – national-letter.org
Intercollegiate Horse Show Association – ihsa.com
College-Bound Invitational – collegeboundinvitationalhorseshow.com

Helpful Reading

"Get Paid to Play" by Nancy Nitardy (Kaplan Publishing; available at amazon.com)

NOTE: *The original version of this document was written by journalist Anne Lang with advice from representatives of the Varsity Equestrian Steering Committee. It first appeared in the 5/16/08 issue of the Chronicle of the Horse (www.chronofhorse.com).*