

# Oklahoma State Wins National NCEA Title, Thanks To #Family

A concerted effort to bring English and western riders together as a team—and the desire to revenge a close loss last year—gives OSU the motivation to win the national championship.

By **Kelsey Baker**



Oklahoma State University won the National Collegiate Equestrian Association Championship at World Equestrian Center—Ocala in Ocala, Fla. *NOAH SOUTHARD PHOTO*

While Oklahoma State University has won multiple national championships in western riding, the team had never won an overall National Collegiate Equestrian Association Championship. But this year, the Cowgirls showed they also had the English riding prowess necessary to take the overall title, defeating No. 3-ranked Texas A&M in the championship held April 14-16 at the World Equestrian Center—Ocala in Ocala, Florida.

The win hinged on the performances of both English and western riders. They're judged separately, but the scores are cumulative.

"Last year at Nationals, we made it to the semi-finals, and we knew we could do it," jumping seat assistant coach Olivia Dorey said. "And so that loss last year and

the semi-finals and how that hit our team, I feel like it really drove us to win this year. We came in this year, just ready to go."

"I feel like it kind of just built with our team over time," senior Sydnie Ziegler said of the team's strength during the COVID-19 pandemic. "We got stronger. It's like a family, and everyone got closer."

Dorey said that "family" became so central to OSU's team culture that it was their hashtag for the season. She said it starts at the top, with unity and cooperativeness between coaches, and then trickles down to the captains and the rest of the team.

"As you can imagine the western and jumping seat worlds are very different," she said. "There's definitely different beliefs on those sides, and so intermixing those

and then finding a way to work together, because there are things that you have to agree on—what direction to take the team and how we want to do it. And we come from very different backgrounds. So, finding that mix and balance and compromise and being able to work well together in that way, it's really important."

OSU's coaches value a united front to the team, cultivating a climate of selflessness and integration between western and hunt seat riders that made winning the NCEA title possible.

"We need to make sure that every time we step in front of that team that we are a united front, no matter what," Dorey said. "We all have to be 100% bought-in, and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work, and then we turn around, and we try something new, and we go about it a different way. But every time we're in front of the team, we have to make sure that we 100% are speaking on behalf of all of us, not just one of us."

The coaches don't limit leadership to the barn. Head coach Larry Sanchez and his wife, Julie, would host groups of riders at their house for a home-cooked meal. For team members, particularly freshmen away from home for the first time, or riders who particularly struggled amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, that home environment and sense of belonging has been a key part of OSU's success.

"A lot of us are from farther away," senior Katie Pelzel said. "We don't have many girls from Oklahoma here. I mean, I can say personally last year, I had a very rough first semester between quarantines from COVID, and then I ended up getting COVID and had to be separated from everyone. They sent me into a hotel by myself. I was there for 10 days, and I'm a social person, so it was not going great for me. Larry and his wife were honestly like saving graces because I think he called me every single day to check in on me. Julie, his wife, brought me food every single day—she went to the store and got me like all these things, and I think he deserves a lot of credit for the way we all feel about the team."

Pelzel also serves as a jump seat captain. She noted that the bond between team coaches set the example for her and co-captain, senior Abigail Brayman, and the two western captains. They made a point to schedule time amidst riding practice and academic schedules to get together, get to know each other, and show their teams what real western-jump seat integration looks like.

"Between the four of us, we spent a lot of time getting



Jump seat co-captain Katie Pelzel helped unite the OSU team en route to its national title, the first for an OSU women's team. *NOAH SOUTHARD PHOTO*

to know each other because there's two jump seat captains and two western captains, and we would go to dinner with each other, you know, on Fridays and just catch up," Pelzel said. "We tried to get to know each other a little bit better, which I think definitely drove us to want the team to do the same thing. This year was really easy to get to do that because we have so many outgoing personalities, and so many girls are so bought into the team, that making the team a family was really easy, honestly.

"Things are so welcoming here," she continued. "And I think that gives us a lot of power as a team, because we do have freshmen come in sometimes halfway through the year, and they don't really know anybody. But it's really easy to bring them in because so many of the girls are so outgoing and welcoming, and all of our coaches are like that. It's just easy to bring them in as a family. I know we highlight family a lot, but I think that's a huge thing for our team."

Pelzel credits her coaches, teammates and experience with helping to shape her vision as a team captain, particularly when it came to integration with the western riders.

"In the past it's been a little bit more separated, but I think between last year and this year, we've all gotten



“A big thing is to push off like, believe in yourself,” said OSU senior Sydnie Ziegler, “and know that you can do it.” *NOAH SOUTHARD PHOTO*

really close,” she said. “On both sides, between western and English. Some of my best friends are on the western team. We spend so much time with each other. Western isn’t necessarily something I knew a whole bunch about, but you learn so much because we get to watch those girls ride.”

Ziegler echoed the same sentiment: “I think the captains did a great job throughout the year. We had a lot more team get-togethers, but they tried to make it so that you wouldn’t always be with your discipline. So we’d have dinners with people, and it would be a mixture of western and hunt seat, and it kind of breaks it up.”

It hasn’t always been so cohesive between the two disciplines, Ziegler pointed out, and to win NCEA finals, the teams approached integration with intention.

“You’re always normally at practice, you know? You’re with your discipline,” said Ziegler. “That’s not just like practice, home, doing what you got to do, and you only see your roommates or who you practice with. So throughout the year, you get more comfortable being around everyone. I think that’s where a lot of the family really comes together; it used to not kind of be like that.”

Dorey noted that although team leadership strives to strengthen riding skills, she and the other coaches emphasize a culture of selflessness and humility too. The nature of college riding only allows for a few riders to actually compete, forcing the majority of the team to support from the sidelines. While that could create a

## THE MENTAL ADVANTAGE

Oklahoma State University’s road to winning the NCEA title started with proactive mental health. While there’s no requirement to see the OSU sports psychologist, team rider Sydnie Ziegler noted how her riding has benefitted since she started working with him. She’s improved her positivity and goal setting, which she said has boosted her performance.

“I think a big thing is to push off, like believe in yourself and know that you can do it,” she said. “I think a lot of us, personally for me, I doubted myself for a while, and that would hold me back, just doubting from the beginning. Because if you doubt, you’re



PHOTO COURTESY OF SYDNIIE ZIEGLER

not going to have these big goals really, because you’re just going to think you can’t reach them. So I think that setting goals and crossing them off each time and just knowing you can do it.”

Jumping seat co-captain Katie Pelzel noted a similar feeling, having been especially tough on herself when it came to making mistakes in competition. Learning to be kinder to herself helped her compete better.

Ziegler took the sports psychologist’s advice and set her phone’s home screen to something she loves (her dog) with a small list underneath to remind her of her goals and solidify a vision to win. Her list included reminders to “look at your ride as an opportunity to succeed” and “JUST HAVE FUN.”

climate of competitiveness, Dorey got ahead of that.

“There are only five girls going in each event,” Dorey said. “And we carry around 50 girls on our roster, and a lot of those jumping seat girls cross over between fences and flat.”

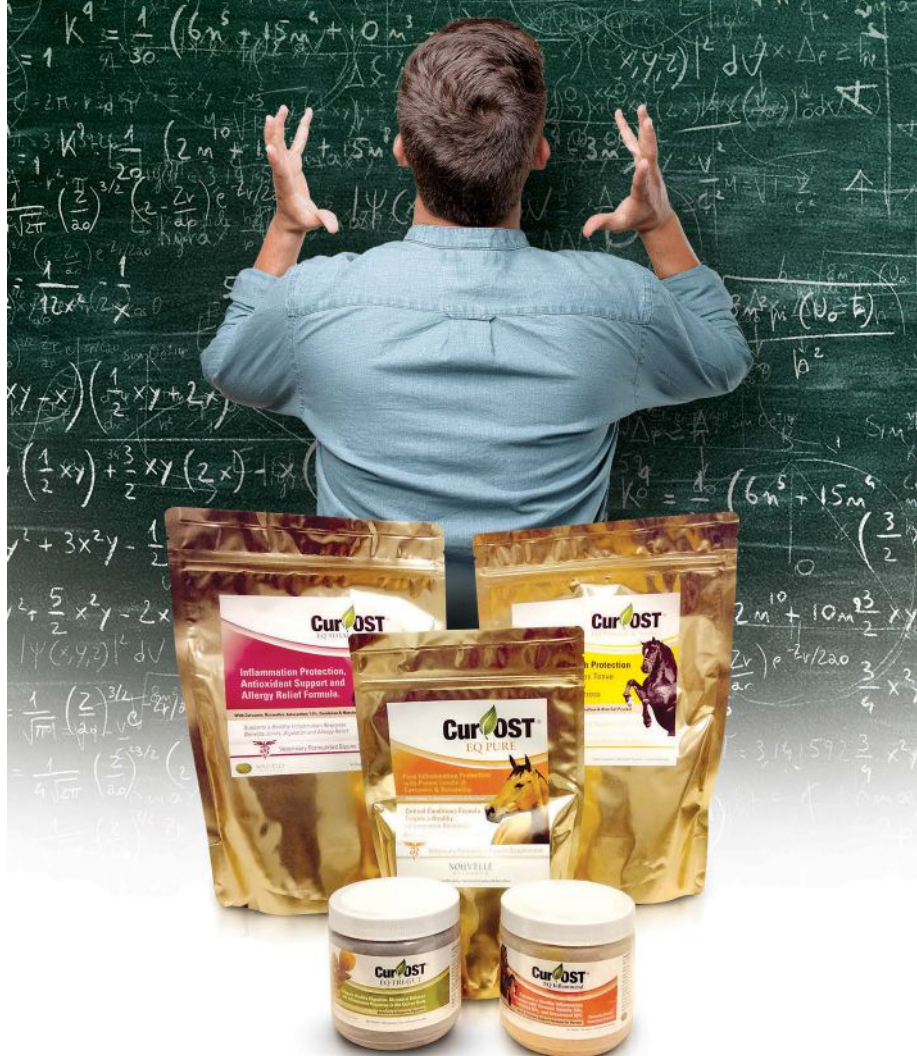
Only seven out of 18 jumping seat riders started on OSU’s team at Nationals. “Only seven of those girls got a chance to get in competition gear and get out in the ring. It takes the entire team, though, to make that win happen, because you need to feel that support from the girls that are watching you going there, if you’re going to go in and do your best,” Dorey said. “If you feel like they’re just wanting your spot and not supporting you, you’re probably not going to go out there as confident. So we look for those girls to be supporting no matter what your role is. Every role matters when it comes down to it, and it took every single one of those girls to get the win that we did, not just the girls that walked into that ring. It took a family effort, and it’s like everybody supporting each other to be able to do what we did.”

Dorey, a member of the University of Georgia’s 2014 All-SEC team and 2014 NCEA national championship team, was a four-time letter winner. “I’ve been through the ups and downs of college riding,” she said. “It takes a lot.”

She said she brought some of the team dynamics she learned at Georgia to OSU.

“Every team is different. There were some things that are different from the team that I was on, but just some of those things that I knew would help this team get to where they wanted to go,” she said. “It’s been a really fun switch

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## YOUNG ENTRY

over—being able to think back to what I went through, and what these girls are going through, and the commitment and dedication that it takes. I'm able to understand them.”

She believes team setbacks have been just as important as wins. Last year's loss at the NCEA finals, in the wake of their Big 12 win, might have been just the push the OSU team needed to win this year.

“I think that loss last year really actually made us believe, because we knew that we had everything that it took,” she said. “And so we were really upset because we knew we could have done it last year. It really made us come in pushing harder this year to get it done, and we did.” 🍎

### NCEA National Championship Ocala, Fla.—April 14-16

#### DUAL-DISCIPLINE TEAM COMPETITION

##### 1. Oklahoma State University

(Emma Pacyna, Sydney Ziegler, Hope King, Riley Hogan, Abigail Brayman, Katie Pelzel, Grace McReynolds, Claire McDowall, Maddie Fussell, Caroline Nielson, Natalie Vargo, Jojo Roberson, Stephanie Helsen, Quincee Clark, Hannah Lovrien, Molly Mitchell)

##### 2. Texas A&M University

(Morgan Rosia, Haley Redifer, Brooke Brombach, Devon Thomas, Kaitlyn Lovingfoss, Rhian Murphy, Caroline Dance, Nicole Leonard, MacKenzie Chapman, Hayley Riddle, Ella Petak, Hanna Olaussen, Cori Cansdale, Taylor Masson, Emmy Lu Marsh, Keesa Luers, Lisa Bricker, Marissa Harrell)

► Competed through semi-finals: Texas Christian University (S. Berube, R. Rast, E. Lucibello, I. Baxter, A. Scully, J. Albaugh, L. Smith, W. Weatherly, S. Graham, J. McAllister, K. Smith, M. Dukes, P. Boutelle, M. Buchanan, B. Andrews); Southern Methodist University (A. Piolet, E. Jolly, T. Madden, D. Seek, E. Yeager, H. Humphries, M. Johnson, M. Seade, M. Eppink, M. Waldron, N. Kearns, P. Neiberger, M. Vroegh, L. Anderson, T. Zimmerman, J. Pfisthner, C. Head, D. Latimer, M. Richards)

► Competed through quarter-finals: Fresno State University (C. Hayes, A. Bertozzi, O. Ferro, L. Stodden, G. Mathias, S. Tuck, E. Martin, T. Holstead, A. Krebs, H. Buijs, E. Maul, K. Thom, B. Moch, J. Kelley, L. Padrick, B. Alexander, A. Welman, H. Heiber); University Of Georgia (J. Toering, R. McMullen, E. Reichow, C. Peralta, H. Mairano, C. Bresch, S. Pilla, N. Andrews, S. Lewis, K. Gill, L. Anderson, J. Stopperich, G. Himes, J. Bound, C. Blumer, C. Lyons, L. Guynn, I. Hehr); Baylor University (C. Fuller, D. Silvestri, M. Mitchell, M. Vorhies, E. Fletcher, M. Mainwaring, I. Rosa, N. Vasquez, G. Marty, E. Naruszewicz, A. Pratt, M. Callaway, S. Clausen, J. Meierstorf, D. Kaufman); Auburn University (E. Kurtz, E. Ferrigno, A. Stearns, M. Segars, S. Steckbeck, H. Ulrich, O. Tordoff, D. Green, T. Searles, M. Parduhn, M. Spak, I. Tesmer, B. Kammerrerr, T. Granger)

#### SINGLE-DISCIPLINE TEAM COMPETITION

##### 1. University Of Lynchburg

(Fallyn Belcastro, Jacqi Needle, Emma Schweizer, Kelley McCormick, Lucy Metzler, Taylor Herzog)

##### 2. Sweet Briar College

(Britt Larson-Jackson, Paige Kennedy, Katherine Atherton, Emmy Longest, Kacie Freeburg)

► Competed through semi-finals: State University Of New York At New Paltz (A. Ryan, B. Smith, D. Looney, S. Morreale); Sewanee: The University Of The South (L. Shoaf, G. Aiken, S. Bucchoiz, K. Ferguson, G. Ranson)



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