

As more and more events, athletic seasons, and schools shut down due to the spread of COVID-19, I have had a unique opportunity to look back on what the virus cannot take from me. As a college student, I have been given countless opportunities I would have missed out on had I not chosen Midway University to continue my education. Through Midway, I have made incredible connections with people in the equine industry as well as out of the industry, but I have also been able to be a part of an athletic team for almost four years now. Coming into my senior year of high school I was hesitant to continue competing in IHSA because the show setup is completely different from any other circuit; however, joining this team was one of the best decisions I have made so far. Not only have I improved in my riding, I have become a better person because of IHSA. Through competing, I have gained confidence in who I am as a person, rider, and as a horseman which is something I never thought I would achieve.

Looking back at high school, I was lucky enough to attend a school that had a Varsity level equestrian team. For each season (held in the fall) there would be three district meets held on back to back weekends in September on Sundays. Post season, the top two teams at the end of Districts qualified for Regionals and the top two teams at Regionals moved on to States. At these meets there would be classes like showmanship, jumping, saddle seat, bareback, reining, and gymkhana.

Little did I know joining this team would bring me my once in a lifetime horse, Nick, and my coach who quickly became one of my closest friends. At the first team practice back in 2013, my coach, Hannah Hansen, saw something in my riding that I had not even recognized. While she watched me ride my borrowed Connemara Welsh pony for the season, she saw drive, my competitive edge, and my versatility as a rider. She saw that I would ride anything she put me on and work until I had mastered it. It was after that first practice my freshman year that Hannah decided that she was going to teach me everything she knew about all three disciplines and horses in general.

Practice after practice Hannah would push me to work harder on my technique, posture, and effectiveness in the weeks prior to our district meets. At the meets, Hannah would have me maxed out in nine classes which was the most any rider on a team could be put in. Because of Hannah I not only became a better rider, but I also broadened my versatility and knowledge of the equine industry. Even though I did bring home state titles, and four consecutive years of MVP for our equestrian team, the lessons I learned from Hannah had a greater impact on me than any title or trophy ever could. Not only did Hannah pour her time and knowledge into me, she also lent me her once in a lifetime horse, Nick.

Nick and I fit like gold. He was what I needed and I was what he needed. Hannah asked me to use Nick for my sophomore year on through my senior year of high school because she recognized just how much we could learn from each other. As a one eyed, flashy grey Anglo Arabian one can only imagine the personality and spirit this horse had, but it was not long until Nick became my everything. He was the first horse I never had.

One of the most impactful years we had together was when I completely tore my ACL and sprained my MCL at the end of my junior year in a lacrosse game. The doctors told me I

could not ride and I would have to have surgery which would take up to nine months to recover from. I was devastated that I was not going to be able to ride for my equestrian team in my senior year; however, there was hope for me yet. The surgeon we found wanted me to wait to have surgery until after I spent my summer doing physical therapy and if riding did not injure my knee any further, I could ride. Although, I did have to sport a very stylish—not—knee brace both on the ground and in the saddle and my equestrian team did affectionately nickname me “Gimpy”. After a summer of physical therapy and dedication, I was able to push off surgery until November and compete in the best season of my high school career with Nick. Thanks to my inspirational coach Hannah and incredible horse Nick, I was able to go confidently into my freshman year of college ready to compete at the IHSA level.

Fast-forward three years to the fall semester of 2019 where I was heading into my junior year of college with a packed academic schedule and preparing for my third IHSA season. The day before we started back classes at school in Kentucky for the semester, I received notice while I was at work that Nick had been putdown. He was only 14. Heartbroken would not even begin to explain the emotions I felt losing him so suddenly, tragically and worst of all not being able to be home in Michigan to say goodbye.

Losing Nick was extremely difficult, but I had to focus on the upcoming IHSA season. Going into the season as an open fences and intermediate flat rider, I was determined to work harder than I ever had before. This was the year that I decided I was going to do everything in my power to get to Nationals for my coach, Hannah, and for Nick. I wanted to make it to Nationals to prove that you do not have to have ridden the fancy horses to be a skilled rider and I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it.

After having a successful show season and qualifying for both fences and flat, I came into Regionals even more determined. I had my coaches, Heath and Conner, my team, and my family all behind me. I had practiced for this day with the sole intent of putting in the best over fences trip of my IHSA career thus far. After a beautiful fences round I came away with winning my class. I cannot tell you the amount joy and accomplishment I felt when the announcer called me as the winner in open fences. There is nothing more rewarding than to see your hard work and dedication start to pay off especially after losing the horse that helped build your confidence to get you there. Even though the season had to come to an early end due to COVID-19, I have come to the realization that it was never about making it to Nationals. It was all about learning to believe and have confidence in myself as a rider, horseman, and as a woman.

Now that the season is over, I have had the opportunity to reflect back on just how big of an impact my coach Hannah and IHSA has had on me as a person and as a rider. Through everything, Corona Virus and all, I am so grateful for the opportunities I have been given through this organization and the lessons I have been taught. Next year, in the last season of my IHSA career I hope to make it to Nationals, but I also hope to become an advocate for riders who struggle with self-doubt and help them start to believe in their abilities by using my own personal story and experiences.

Being a horseman is not about the flashy lights, top level shows, or fancy prizes it is all about developing yourself into the person you want to become through work ethic, passion, and determination. If you are willing to put in the work, countless opportunities will be headed your way and anything will be possible for you.