

SPORTS

THE BATTALION

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A&M's national title contender: Equestrian

By Jordan Meserole
THE BATTALION

Recent losing football seasons and several losing basketball seasons have often clouded many Texas A&M students' minds. Few realize they don't have to look very far to find an Aggie team that will be competing in a national championship this season.

Hidden behind many trees and a gate with an A&M logo pasted to the front lies a small dirt road. A trip down the bumpy dirt road reveals a large brown, open-air building. There is no VIP parking - however, under the shade of a tree is a premium spot. A walk into the building reveals a few bleachers with paint that is chipping and fading. Loud chirping fills the building as birds fly rafter to rafter, and there's a slight smell to the building that the average city person isn't accustomed to. This is not the typical sight a person would expect to see when thinking of national champions.

Since achieving varsity status five years ago, the A&M equestrian team has consistently produced success. The team has seen five different riders win an individual national championship from 2000 to 2002 and has won the last two western national championships. Although every rider is considered a member of the equestrian team, the squad is broken into two different sections: western and English style riding squads. It has been the western squad that has brought A&M both of its national team titles. This year, it will be the English squad's chance to bring the trophy back home.

This won't be the first time the English squad has been to the national championship. In

2001, the team placed seventh at nationals. Head coach Tana Rawson, who has been the head coach since the team became a varsity sport, said the team has advanced a lot over the years.

"We've gotten better resources to be able to go farther," Rawson said. "When I got here, we had roughly 18 horses. Now we have close to 50."

The A&M English team captured the regional team championship and the trip to the national championships after a meet two weekends ago at West Texas A&M University. The Aggies also had 13 riders qualify for regional competition this season, with the opportunity to advance to the championship on an individual basis. The Aggies finished out as overall point leader over two-time defending regional champion Oklahoma State University. The Aggies and the Cowgirls have always been neck-and-neck; last year's point total champion was decided by the last event between the two teams.

"It's frustrating to work over the years to work as hard as you do and be as close as we have been," Rawson said. "It's a big sigh of relief to get that win."

A&M English coach Pam Bremmer said the success has come from hard workouts that involve more than just getting on the horse. Bremmer said much like other sports, English riding takes physical toughness as well as mental toughness.

"Many people don't think so, but these girls are true athletes," Bremmer said. "There are muscles you never knew you had until you get up on a horse."

A&M freshman Erica Palomo said riding takes true dedication to the sport, a dedication that



EVAN O'CONNELL • THE BATTALION

Senior English rider **Meredith Houx** and her horse **Houdini** practice Monday night at the Cedar Trace Stable in College Station. **Houx** won this season's regional high-point title for the third consecutive season.

some athletes don't experience.

"We wake up at 5:30 a.m. to pick up horse manure - not many other people will do that," Palomo said.

The English success has come largely with help from senior rider Meredith Houx. She captured the yearly regional high-point rider crown this season - her third consecutive time to

achieve the honor. Houx earned a sixth-place finish last year competing for the Cacchione Cup, which is awarded for the top English riders in the nation. Houx said winning the cup would be a good end to her collegiate career and knows the competition will be just as tough as previous years. The soft-spoken Houx seems uneasy talking

about her accomplishments though, flashing a quick dimpled smile and changing the subject.

"I'm really no different than any of the others out here," Houx said. "Hopefully things will work out for the team at nationals. Last year we were so close to getting there, and this year I think A&M has a great opportunity to win - it would be

great to see the team win."

The English team will pack its bags and saddles May 7 to head for Murfreesboro, Tenn. Upon returning home, perhaps the team will get to hang one more championship banner from the dusty rafters. A championship might help convert Aggie sports fans from jeering to cheering once again.

RA Appreciation Day

We realize that you may already know them as student, leader or friend, but we also want you to know how much we, the Department of Residence Life, appreciate having them on our staff. Please join us in thanking our Resident Advisors for their dedication, concern and commitment to providing leadership and healthy community living.

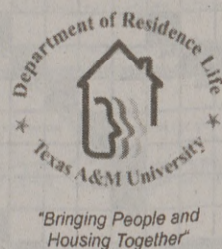
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Johnathan Ledbetter
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