Meet the Youth Convention Scholarship Winners

The 2013 recipients share their USDF convention experiences

Supported by funds raised at the annual USDF Youth Programs Advisory Subcommittee Silent Auction, held at the Adequan/USDF Annual Convention, these scholarships provide financial aid to young dressage enthusiasts to help defray the expenses associated with attending the convention.

Scholarship recipients are asked to write essays describing their convention experiences. Read on to learn how these young people benefited from becoming more involved with the USDF.

Madison Bigler, Sandy, UT

Madison Bigler, 17, is a member of the Utah Dressage Society and a leader in the local Junior/Young Rider program. She has been competing and training in dressage since she was nine, and in 2013 she earned her USDF bronze medal. She is currently pursuing certification as a veterinary technician during her senior year of high school, and she plans to become a large-animal veterinarian.

I attended my first USDF convention in Kentucky in December 2013. What a great experience. We arrived a day early and toured a working stud farm and traveled through some of the most beautiful horse country I’ve ever seen. It was so great to see horses in big green rolling pastures. We also got to visit the Keeneland race track and watch some horses being put through their paces. That same day we visited the museums at the Kentucky Horse Park and gained a wealth of information about the world of horses.

The next day, my education really began as I attended one class after another on various subjects all related to horses. My career goal is to become a veterinarian, and I am currently attending a veterinary-technician program. I felt like the scheduled educational classes had been planned just for me. My favorites were “Degenerative Joint Disease in the Performance Horse” with Dr. Victoria Maxwell and “Equine Rehabilitation” with Kristen Johnson. I have an older off-the-track Thoroughbred, so these two classes were especially applicable. I also enjoyed gaining insight into how Adequan works in horses’ joints.

On Friday I visited KESMARC to see the rehabilitation process and how each of its programs benefits healing and conditioning in the horse. I discussed their internship program with them and learned what I would need to do to apply. I could have stayed there all day, but there were more opportunities waiting back at the convention.

That evening, I got the opportunity to meet the other youth at convention at a pizza party. It was fun visiting with various people and hearing about their horses and backgrounds. Saturday I attended the youth breakfast, which was very entertaining. USDF education programs coordinator Ashley Barnes and USDF Youth Programs Advisory Council chair Lauren Griffen made it extremely fun, and then things turned a little more serious with the discussion on ethics and then college or pro. My mother was so glad that each person on the panel said it was possible to attend college and ride. Not easy but possible. My own horse journey has not been easy, and personally I think dressage is hard, which is why I love it. I’m up for the college-and-horse challenge, and I intend to make it work and was truly inspired by the panel to be successful.

During the breakfast I met Rebekkah Mingari, and it seemed like we’d known each other our entire lives. It’s amazing how far away you live from all these other horse people but how easy it is to visit and talk since you have so much in common. We sat together at the banquet and laughed and talked for four hours. She cheered when I got my bronze and first-place awards, and I cheered when she received her silver. We’ve talked several times since, and we promised to keep in touch.

The entire experience was so educational and personally fulfilling. I would definitely love to attend again and hope the opportunity presents itself. Without the scholarship it would have been a real hardship on my parents, so I want to close by saying how grateful I am to the USDF for affording me this opportunity.

Anna Weniger, Apex, NC

Anna Weniger, 15, is a USDF silver and bronze medalist who competes her Connemara, Big Bear’s Royal Finnegan, at Third Level. She plans to continue to take him up the levels and aspires to the FEI Junior and Young Rider ranks. Anna is the co-founder, organizer, and reporter for the Chatham/Durham/Orange County Chapter of the North Carolina Dressage and Combined Training Association Junior Club. She is homeschooled and spends her spare time writing fiction.
I was hesitant to put my name in for the convention scholarship. The winners from past years seemed to be older than me, more famous than me, and volunteering 24/7. I didn’t think I could compete. Luckily, my mother convinced me to apply anyway, and somehow I won. I want to encourage anyone considering it next time to apply. It’s worth it. Thanks to USDF for making this scholarship possible, and thanks for awarding me one of the scholarships.

The convention was so jam-packed with lectures and meetings that I usually had to ask myself not what I wanted to go to but what I could afford to miss. I started with Dr. Victoria Maxwell’s lecture on degenerative joint disease and then went on to the Youth Programs Committee meeting. It was particularly useful to hear what various GMOs do for their youth members and gave me some ideas for my GMO (NCDCTA). I also attended the FEI Junior/Young Rider Committee meeting and the Adult Programs Committee meeting. I can relay firsthand that they really do want all types and levels of horses and riders to apply for the adult clinics! At the end of the day it was a full house for one of my favorite lectures: “The Dressage Sport Horse: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” by Kristi Wysocki and Bill Solyntjes. Especially considering my inadequate knowledge of conformational strengths and weaknesses, I found this lecture extremely informative. We learned how to draw “plumb lines” to determine how uphill the horse is, assess the angles of the shoulder and hindquarters, and look for a strong “pillar of support,” a vertical line that runs through the groove in the forearm. The lecture armed me with enough knowledge to fairly consider a horse’s conformation.

On Friday, I started the day with the Region 1 meeting and then went to the Competition Open Forum, where I tried to wrap my head around how the new FEI Intermediate A and B tests will affect competition. I also went to “The Importance of Gastrointestinal Health in the Equine Athlete” by Dr. Frank Pellegrini, which most memorably reinforced things that we horse owners know but often ignore: anything besides the horse’s natural environment is stressful, and any stress can lead to ulcers; and letting the horse eat constantly, even if it has to be low-quality food, is the best ulcer prevention. Friday evening, I got stuck with the dilemma of the youth pizza party happening at the same time as “Myth Busters of Equine Sports Medicine” by Dr. Duncan Peters. In the end, I ran back and forth between them and was able to meet some interesting people, including Madison Bigler and Taylor Yamamoto, the other scholarship winners, and learn some useful things at the myth-busters lecture.

Saturday was the only day that I made it out of bed early enough to attend “Basics of Rider Fitness” with Debbie Rodriguez, and I am glad that I did. It helped me realize how important strength and fitness are, and I found that I enjoyed her style of workout. My family has been keeping up with the DVD. Later that morning were several youth-focused items. At the youth breakfast, I got to meet other young people who are serious about dressage. Next was the Youth Open Forum and then “After High School: College or Go Pro?” (the answer is college, but that shouldn’t be a surprise). I went to two more education sessions that afternoon, Dr. Chris Newton’s “Lameness in the Dressage Sport Horse” and Dr. Joe Pagan’s “Evo-
olution of Sport Horse Feeding.” That evening was the Salute Gala, where I got to pick up my silver medal and All-Breeds awards onstage.

On Sunday, we stayed for the last two educational sessions. The first was the Fireside Chat with Charles de Kunffy, who called today “the age of the superior horse and the minimal rider.” The rider’s knowledge used to be more important, but since horses are now bred to be spectacular movers, the rider does not have to work as hard. De Kunffy stressed the importance of collection, which is forgotten by modern riders, who “run.” “Speed is the enemy of engagement.” Riders as a group do not generally line up with classical standards, he said. I am thrilled that USDF inducted de Kunffy into the Hall of Fame and allowed him that talk, because his words need to spread.

Last but far from least was Dr. Clara Fenger’s talk on neurological issues, which I found fascinating. The horse’s gaits are initiated in the brain but continued in the spinal cord, which is why always asking the horse to do something keeps its brain engaged and why transitions will refocus a distracted horse. Some horses that have huge movement actually have equal ataxia, or incoordination, in both front limbs. Neurologic issues are something to look out for in those extravagant movers.

Whenever I go to huge educational events like the USDF convention, I seem to come away with a few things that stick in my mind. One was Charles de Kunffy’s image of a bowstring that connects the hocks to the bridle and can be adjusted in length. It has become my new favorite image, particularly for bringing my horse’s back up in the canter, for adjusting stride length, and for half-halts. The other memorable thing was Dr. Fenger’s statement that we may be breeding horses who have a genetic marker for uncoupled motion, in which the front forearm and hind cannon bone are not parallel in trot. Not on purpose, of course, but when selecting for horses with big movement in front, we might ignore what is going on behind. This blew my mind because I have seen unbroken horses moving like the “leg movers” made with incorrect riding, but believed it impossible, so I had ignored it. But what I saw was the truth: Some of those horses have a different genetic code, much like the one that makes gaited horses gaited. This completely changed my perspective on shopping for horses. If they are natural leg movers, they may not be able to be fixed. Watching a horse moving loose, you cannot assume that its movement is correct. You have to study it.

The overarching theme I heard at the convention was: Treat the horse like a horse. Dr. Peters’ number-one recommendation for the overall well-being of the horse was to get out of the ring. He also advocated cross-training, and like the gastrointestinal health talk, turnout. Lisa Wilcox and Lois Yukins stated that the horse is a mirror image of the rider and will tell you everything you need to know. Dr. Maxwell named incorrect training as a risk factor for degenerative joint disease. And, of course, Charles de Kunffy’s whole talk was about the importance of classical training and respect for the horse. He called the horse “not a porcelain toy.” If so many people can talk about correct training, turnout, cross-training, and work outside the ring at a national convention, we might see it happen one day soon.

Taylor Yamamoto, Honolulu, HI

Taylor Yamamoto, 17, is pursuing a degree in biology from the University of Hawaii. She volunteers her time at local dressage competitions and at a local health center for the underprivileged. She is the president of the Aloha State Dressage Society’s Junior Young Rider Council and a graduate of The Dressage Foundation’s Equestrian Fundraising School. She has competed at the Prix St. Georges and Intermediate I levels on her horse, Domino. Together they have won numerous awards from ASDS, USDF, and USEF.

Thanks to the youth convention scholarship, I was able to attend the USDF annual convention in the horse capital of Lexington, KY. I have been able to attend in the past, but I didn’t think I would be able to this year. It makes me all the more grateful to USDF for granting me this scholarship. I was able to attend a number of different sessions, starting with the regional and youth committee meetings. I love these because I always learn about new programs that have been developed and how to avoid potential problems in these programs. And all the youth sessions really give you a chance to meet other young dressage riders.

The Region meetings discussed things like the new rider tests and how to motivate and attract members for local GMOs. It was very interesting to hear how different GMOs organize events and awards. I will definitely tell my local GMO and hopefully give them some ideas! The Youth Programs Committee meeting discussed things like the new Ravel grants and who is eligible for them. I love how all these meetings always teach me something new about current happenings within USDF.

All the junior/young rider sessions were really well planned. I especially enjoyed “After High School: College or Go Pro?” This session was a panel discussion on the pros and cons of go-
Apply for a 2014 Youth Convention Scholarship

Each year, the USDF Youth Programs Advisory Subcommittee selects up to four USDF youth members to receive a scholarship to help defray the costs of attending the Adequan/USDF Annual Convention. Criteria include participation in USDF or dressage-related activities, written communication skills, and the desire to learn. Applicants must be current USDF youth members.

Applications are due August 15. Learn more and download an application at usdf.org (Awards/Other/Youth Convention Scholarship).

Going to college or not and how college can complement your riding career. It was very interesting to hear what the panelists had to say and their advice on how to better your dressage career. Since the panelists were people with all different backgrounds, we got all kinds of feedback from so many accomplished people.

I also really liked how there were social things for Jr/YRs that didn’t hold a lot of discussion time but just let us get to connect and meet each other. The unscheduled pizza party and the youth breakfast were really fun, relaxed ways to meet everyone and get to know them.

Of course, a trip to Lexington wouldn’t be complete without a visit to the Kentucky Horse Park. The facility is enormous; you look out and it is like it just keeps going! We were lucky enough to be there before Christmas, so they had all their gorgeous Christmas lights set up, too.

I want to again thank USDF for granting me this scholarship and putting on all these incredible educational seminars. Every year I learn so much, and I hope to be able to keep attending this convention!

Editor’s note: The fourth 2013 scholarship recipient, Sydney Collier, 15, of Millbrook, NY, was unable to attend convention.