

Hard Hats And Thinking Caps

During weeks of competition at the major winter show circuits, on-site classrooms help young riders keep up with schoolwork.

Anne Lang

AT THE BEGINNING of each December, Reed Kessler of Armonk, N.Y., says goodbye to her classmates and teachers and heads to Florida to show for four months. When she returns in early April, Kessler said she's far enough ahead in her studies that she can "pretty much coast for a month or so."

That's because the tenth-grader enrolls in a guided-study program operated by Private Tutoring Services, which offers classroom settings and one-on-one instruction at several winter show circuits, including HITS Ocala (Fla.), Gulfport Winter Series (Miss.) and Jacksonville Winter Series (Fla.). But the company's primary equestrian branch is located at the FTI Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Fla., where Kessler shows.

Near the exhibitors' entrance at WEF (a 12-week circuit), PTS has created a mini-campus of sorts, featuring two 50-foot climate-controlled trailers equipped with

state-of-the-art educational amenities (including WiFi) and an outdoor patio where riders can study, take a quiet break or socialize.

Last season, PTS served more than 50 school-aged riders at WEF. Educational-support programs of all kinds operate at WEF and the other major circuits. But PTS, piloted by longtime director Joanne Weiner, is one of the largest.

Kessler's history with PTS dates back to her pony days, when she was in fifth grade. Her parents, who also ride, wanted to secure their daughter in a program that would ensure she could keep up with her schoolwork while the family competed at WEF.

"Before I started [with PTS]," said Kessler, 15, "I went to a private school that wasn't very supportive of my missing classes for horse shows. So I used to fly back and forth every weekend, but it was just exhausting. And even



(Mollie Bailey Photo)

Reed Kessler takes advantage of a guided-study program operated by Private Tutoring Services while competing at the FTI Winter Equestrian Festival. "You need to get yourself to your classes and make each session count," she said.

Kendall Miejer (*left*) attends the Education Station on-site school with friends Juliette Crowell, Kaleigh Barkaszi, Arek Barkaszi and Owen Linback, while competing on the HITS Ocala circuit. "The most difficult part is the perseverance it takes to set personal deadlines in order to complete everything on time," she said.

though my teachers let me go, they let me know they weren't happy about it."

Kessler knew other riders who'd taken classes with Weiner, so she started to do the same. "I love it because you work at your own pace," she said. "At home, it's always slower in a classroom where there are more people. Here, once you get something, you just move right ahead. I always feel like I understand everything better when I'm here."

Weiner's involvement with PTS dates back to 1988, "when there were only about 100 horses here," she recalled. Today, she heads up a WEF-based staff that includes an academic director, a dean of students, a person who coordinates with the home-based schools, and numerous tutors—comprised mostly of retired or inactive teachers, graduate students or post-graduate students.

PTS is open seven days a week, allowing for maximum flexibility based on the vast range of clients' show schedules.

"We have staff coming in shifts," Weiner said. "We're here until 8:30 or 9 p.m. daily. Monday is our biggest day—we're always booked solid. The kids who fly back and forth [to their schools at home during the week] are allowed to use our trailers on the weekends."

Each week, more than 300 hours of PTS tutoring takes place, mostly on the showground and occasionally at the students' temporary local homes. Some students only partake of a few hours of tutoring per week; others enroll for several hours per day.

A Considerable Investment

"We attract really good staff," Weiner declared, "which is why we're the most expensive program. We offer one-on-one tutoring by highly qualified educators, and we pay them well to keep them here."

The PTS hourly rate ranges from \$135-\$175, depending on a student's level or needs. Built into the fee is individual tutoring, communication between tutors and the students' home schools and weekly reports. Other services might include daily reports or video-conferencing. The average cost range per student is \$10,000-\$40,000 for the season, depending on the student's needs and the number of weeks he or she is there.

If requested, PTS partners with a variety of distance-learning programs for accredited high school diploma courses for college-bound students. "We also have a few riders doing their university-level courses with us," Weiner said, "through correspondence."



(Photo courtesy of Iris Diaz)

Some students are required to go through the formality of dropping out of school before they leave to show for multiple weeks, then must re-enroll when they return.

"In those cases," Weiner said, "[we] just enroll the student in a distance-learning program. That way, they get a transcript when they go back, and there's no problem, other than the extra cost of having to pay for the classes. But it's worth it.

"Our goal is to maximize our students' time while they're here," Weiner emphasized. "We try to get all their homework done while they're with us in the trailer, because these kids just don't have the extra time to do it—especially if they're riding six or more horses a day."

That's often the case with Kessler, who shows in grand prix, 1.50-meter jumpers and high junior jumpers. She also catch-rides in the equitation and junior hunter divisions.

"In past years," she said, "I would go Monday through Thursday for tutoring and show from Friday through Sunday. But this year, I've been doing the Thursday grand prix. So if I miss a Thursday, I have to catch up. Sometimes I'll do that by coming in for night classes. The PTS

**"I love it because you work at your own pace.
Once you get something, you just move right ahead."**

—Reed Kessler

(Photo courtesy of Mary Cuning)



Thermal's HITS School Station consists of three climate-controlled rooms housed in one permanent unit and one modular unit—each furnished with computers, WiFi and other modern conveniences.

the academic cutting edge. "Reed took the PSAT a year early," Teri said, "and she's right on track. Joanne's program has been such an enrichment to Reed's education."

Reed's trainers, Katie and Henri Prudent of Plain Bay Farm, cooperate with school obligations. "Of course, Katie's focus in Reed's life is to make Reed the best rider she can possibly be," Teri said, "and to prepare her for a possible career as an international competitor. But she's supportive of Reed's schooling, and she's respectful of our academic expectations for Reed's future."

Weiner said most trainers are equally supportive. "They see that if the kids are feeling stimulated intellectually and satisfied with where they are in their schoolwork, they actually perform better in the show ring," said Weiner, who tries to work around trainers' preferred riding practice times.

Reed offered advice for riders who are considering enrolling in showground schools for the first time: "You just have to be very responsible about it," she said. "You can't take advantage of having one-to-one tutoring. You need to get yourself to your classes and make each session count. Also, you need to stay in touch with your tutors and with your teachers at home, especially. Because for a lot of them, it's a stretch to even let you go at all."

tutors are very flexible. They'll even come to your house if they need to."

At home, Kessler attends the Professional Children's School in New York City. PCS accommodates the needs of students whose outside commitments require being away for days, weeks and sometimes months at a time. Those include professional performers or elite-level amateur athletes like Kessler.

At Kessler's original school back home, "the administrators were generally supportive of Reed's riding and showing," said Kessler's mother, Teri. "But every year, she always had one teacher who just couldn't get behind it. That was frustrating, because Reed was in honors everything, had excellent standardized test scores and was academically motivated. Still, there was always at least one teacher who I think felt horse showing in Florida meant sitting around the pool at The Breakers eating shrimp off a silver tray."

Teri credited PCS and PTS for keeping her daughter on

Some Alternatives To Showground Schools

In the city where your show is based, hire a tutor for one-on-one guidance—conducted during flexible hours at your temporary home or on the showground. Some families team up to hire local tutors for small groups of students.

- Study independently online, either through certified correspondence programs or via electronic communication with teachers back home.
- Remain enrolled in regular school at home, then drive or fly back and forth on weekends to show.
- Enroll as a short-term student at a private or public school in the city where the horse show is located.
- Hire a private tutor who travels with your family from show to show during the entire school season.

Communication Is Key

At the six-week HITS Desert Circuit in Thermal, Calif., Mary Cuning is director of the HITS School Station, the West Coast counterpart to PTS (though the businesses are unrelated). The HSS facility consists of three climate-controlled rooms housed in one permanent unit and one modular unit—each furnished with computers, WiFi and other modern conveniences.

Cuning is in her fourth year directing the school at the Thermal location. Her first three years took place at the show's previous location, in Indio.

"A student's local school is contacted," she said, "and an outline of the materials needed is sent to our teachers. Teachers at the student's home location communicate with us via e-mail, blogs and websites and update the materials as needed. Tests and quizzes are faxed or e-mailed to secure sites and returned by fax or FedEx.

"After receiving the curriculum for each student, we work one-to-one with each student to complete and teach all the materials and projects," said Cuning, who holds double master's degrees (in administration and teaching) and an educational-specialist degree.

"Reports and attendances are sent to the local school at the completion of the student's session here. On the college level, we usually proctor examinations and tests with some reviews if needed. And we prepare students for GED or SAT examinations."

HSS averages 18 students per week, Cuning said, and the teacher-student ratio ranges from 1-1 to 5-1, depending on the grade level or degree of class difficulty. HSS

This was the third year that seventh-grader Savannah Dukes attended the HITS School Station in California. "I work on the same homework and take the same tests every day that I would be doing in school at home," she said. "It works really well."

has two full-time teachers and three part-time teachers. All are certified, have their master's degrees, and have achieved additional certification from Brigham Young University (Utah) to facilitate the college's online programs.

"The work done here with all students is individualized," Cunning explained, "since it continues the curriculum of the students' local schools. Additional work is developed for students to enable them to share with their home class the cultural influence of the area, so we have field trips and guest speakers. In the lower grades, we conclude each session with an art project.

"Students who are showing can adapt to their riding schedule," Cunning added. "They can come and go, change attendance days, or work late."

"Hard hats at school are the uniform of the day."

—Mary Cunning

Morning sessions (8:30 to noon) are offered for elementary and middle/school students, Monday-Friday. Afternoon sessions (1:30-5) are offered for high school students, Monday-Thursday—although some high school students attend on Thursday or Friday mornings due to show schedules. Weekend sessions are available by appointment.

HSS charges a one-time registration fee of \$100. A weekly fee is \$450, a three-week fee is \$1,150 and a six-week fee is \$2,250. Each sibling of an enrolled student pays half price.

Some trainers have encouraged riders to enroll in HSS. On many occasions, said Cunning, when students are juggling academic classes with their horse-show classes, "hard hats at school are the uniform of the day."

Keeping Stress At A Minimum

This was the third consecutive year that Savannah Dukes, a seventh-grader from Yorba Linda, Calif., enrolled in HSS. She spends three to five weeks at Thermal, where she shows in equitation and medal classes. Dukes, 13, said her private school at home cooperates with her attendance at HSS.

"In general," Dukes said, "I'm required to take all of my tests and do all of my homework before missing school for horse shows, which amounts to 40 to 50 days per year. Mary Cunning and her staff communicate with my school every day. I work on the same homework and take the same tests every day that I would be doing in school at home. It works really well."

Dukes didn't enroll in HSS during her first time at



(A.C. Custom Photo)

Thermal. "That year," she admitted, "it was difficult keeping up without teacher instruction. The next two years were so much easier because I had the help of the HITS teachers."

Dukes trains with Robyn Stiegler of Citrus Hill Farms. She said Stiegler is "very supportive and glad that I can spend more time at HITS without missing school. I like it because it allows me to practice riding during the week instead of getting to the horse show just in time to compete. It's a great program that allows me to stay up with school while pursuing my passion of riding."

Her advice to other prospective showground students?

"Communicate with your teachers before you leave, and keep good contact while you are gone," Dukes said. "It's important to prove to your teachers that you are responsible and can be trusted to do your work."

Dukes' mother, Laura, agreed. "It's definitely worked better having Savannah attend school at the show," Laura said. "Because of the small class sizes, she receives a lot of individual attention. It takes the pressure off of me trying to help her with her schoolwork and makes for a more stress-free show for all of us. Because of the daily contact with her school, Savannah always has clear direction on the work she should be doing."

Laura's suggestions for parents of students who intend

Junior and Pony Issue

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—Linda Honeyfield

to miss long periods of school for horse shows: "Meet with your child's principal and administrators at the beginning of the school year to explain how much school will be missed and how attending school at the show makes it possible to stay caught up—and sometimes even get ahead—because of the small class size. Then enjoy the show without the stress!"

Linda Honeyfield, an HSS teacher with 28 years of experience as an educator, is temporarily retired as a teacher/principal while she cares for a family member—so HSS is a perfect fit, all around.

Having students from different grade levels in the same classroom "is a great motivator for kids to have older/younger peers in the same class," added Honeyfield, who often shows up on the weekends to cheer for her students as they compete.

"This program is a lot of fun," said Honeyfield, "and we find that the students return to their schools ahead of the regular classroom."

Lessons in Self-Discipline

Education Station, sister entity to HSS, provides a physical showground school at the nine-week HITS Ocala (Fla.) circuit. The school has been offering services at the show since 1992, and on-site director Iris Diaz has been there since 2000. ES operates out of two modern-equipped,

double-wide trailers—one for elementary/middle school and one for high school.

ES provides a 5-1 student-teacher ratio, and its staff consists of retired principals, retired high school and college professors—all certified, including the substitute. "I do believe we have a great faculty," Diaz stated. "To me, that's what's important."

Similar to HSS, ES students and staff communicate with teachers back home via electronic media and overnight express mail. "We've had students from Spain, Venezuela, Canada and all over the United States," Diaz explained, "so the requirements vary depending on where they are from. Our goal is to make sure that when the students return home they will be on the same page as the rest of their classmates."

Classes are held from Monday-Thursday (9 a.m.-12:30 p.m.), but individual tutoring is offered until 2 p.m. "Our staff is responsible for making sure our students keep up with their home assignments," Diaz said. "We do not create any extra work [such as homework]; we make sure they understand the material and complete their required assignments."

"Some students have to withdraw temporarily from schools back home that do not allow them to be absent for more than a week," Diaz noted. "When this happens, our teachers have to prepare lesson plans for them. Most schools allow their students to attend our school once



Students and staff from the class of 2008 at the Education Station at HITS Ocala, which has been offering services at the show since 1992, posed for a group shot.

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they understand that we will keep in touch with them and act as the student's temporary tutors."

Weekly enrollment at ES is small (four to 12 students) during the first two weeks of the circuit, then gradually swells to between 40 and 75. The fee is \$500 per week for anyone enrolled for fewer than six weeks; \$2,500 for six weeks; and \$400 per week for any additional weeks after six.

"These students are on a very tight schedule," she said, "training, showing, doing barn chores. The fact that they can come to school, sometimes straight from their barn or training ring, saves them time. Often many of them have to leave a class and go straight to the show ring, then back to class. They wouldn't be able to do this if they attended school off the grounds.

"We have exceptional students," Diaz added. "Most of them are A-B students. They need to be extremely focused so they can keep up with their schedules. We've had no problem with trainers. Students and trainers understand that schoolwork needs to be done."

Kendall Meijer, a high school senior from Grand Rapids, Mich., has been attending ES for four years—and shows for the entire nine-week run of the HITS Ocala circuit, which fits perfectly with her home school's third quarter. "So my school sets up a program where I get credits, instead of grades, for my classes in that particular marking period," she said.

"I like the flexibility of doing my schoolwork from a distance," said Meijer, 18, who shows in amateur-owner hunter, adult equitation and low/high adult jumpers. "I also like the independence I get from primarily working alone on my work. The HITS teachers are great when I have a particular question, or if I'm struggling with something. But the program encourages students to work as much on their own as they can, which I think provides a great overall learning experience."

Meijer appreciates that her trainer, Cathy Johnson, supports her showground school commitments—which Meijer acknowledges can occasionally seem steep.

"Sometimes finding enough time for schoolwork is challenging at a busy show," Meijer confessed, "but the most difficult part is the perseverance it takes to set personal deadlines in order to complete everything on time. But I'm usually right on track when I get back to school. The online NetClassroom systems, as well as fast e-mail communication, make it easy to know where I stand in relevance to my classmates at home."

Her advice for newcomers to showground schools? "That's simple," she replied. "Don't procrastinate! If nothing else, being involved with an independent study has forced me to have lots of self-discipline when it comes to completing work on time. It's always nicer to relax knowing you've finished something early rather than getting stressed out with last-minute work." ▲