



Auburn University hunt seat riders (from left) Jennifer Waxman, Hasbrouck Donovan, Elizabeth Benson, Quincy Hayes, Lindsay Portela, Christina Lin, Anna Becker and Jennifer Delman helped the school claim its third overall win in the National Collegiate Equestrian Association National Championships.

## Benson Leads Auburn To National Collegiate Crown

*The Tigers' win of the national hunter seat title prompts a thrilling ride-off for the overall NCEA championship.*

BY ANNE LANG  
PHOTOS BY WILLIE GOMEZ

At around 6 p.m. on April 20, the barn aisle of Auburn University (Ala.) should have been overflowing with ecstatic riders who had just clinched the hunter seat title at the National Collegiate Equestrian Association National Championships in Waco, Texas. Instead, athletes and coaches huddled in small clusters, whispering with tense expressions on their faces.

AU freshman Elizabeth Benson, who minutes earlier had coolly scored the deciding point in equitation over fences against the University of Georgia in the hunter seat championship



bracket (earning scores of 98 and 96 from the judges), found herself at the center of it all.

"After I finished the finals round, I got off and ran up my stirrups, but it hadn't really sunk in yet that we'd just won the hunter seat championship," Benson said. "Then I looked up to see Auburn girls running and everyone cheering in the stands. Seeing the seniors getting emotional and excited was a very good feeling. Then Coach [Jessica] Braswell came up to me and said: 'I really want you to cherish this happy moment, but at the same time, you're not done yet.'"

By winning the hunter seat championship, AU forced a ride-off against the UGA Bulldogs for the overall NCEA championship (hunter seat and Western combined). The ride-off was a nail-biter to the end, with AU coming out on top. UGA took home the overall reserve championship for the third consecutive year and the reserve hunter seat championship for the third time since 2007. The victory marked AU's third overall win and third hunter seat win in the

12-year history of the varsity equestrian championships. During regular-season competition this year, AU's combined team record was 10-2.

For the ride-off, each team was required to choose riders (one for each phase) to compete in the four NCEA events: equitation over fences, equitation on the flat, horsemanship and reining. The winner of each phase would receive 1 point for her team, and the first team to score 3 points would win the championship. Benson, with a 6-0 record for the week, was tapped to compete in both of the hunter seat phases.

"I didn't know that I was going to be the one chosen to do both the fences and the flat phase," said Benson, an 18-year-old business major from Whitehouse Station, N.J. "A couple of my teammates told me 'no pressure,' so that made me feel more confident. They were happy with the hunter seat championship, but of course everyone felt it would be nice if we could pull off the overall win, too."

The flat phase was contested first, pitting Benson against UGA senior standout Carly Anthony. "I was pretty calm," Benson added. "I knew that I had to stay on pattern, show off in the places where I could, and be smart in the places that I had to be." She had good reason to feel calm and confident, having scored a 95 and 94 in the flat phase of the hunter seat championship bracket just hours earlier.

"You trotted in and immediately showed the extension down the center-line, so that kind of set the tone for the rest of it," said Benson. "I felt that my extensions were pretty strong, and my lateral work and lengthenings felt pretty good on that horse, too."

Judges William Sparks and Rita Timpanaro each rewarded Benson with a score of 97, eliciting thunderous cheers and applause from the AU contingent. Anthony answered with another near-flawless test that earned her a 94 from each judge, but the winning point went to AU.

### The Tension Builds

Horsemanship was next, and UGA's Paige Stawicki won the point. Now it was up to Benson to throw down another winning ride over fences, and this time she had the advantage of riding

## NCEA NATIONAL HUNTER SEAT CHAMPIONSHIPS

Waco, Texas—Apr. 18-20

### TEAM

#### 1. AUBURN UNIVERSITY

(Anna Becker, Elizabeth Benson, Jennifer Delman, Hasbrouck Donovan, Quincy Hayes, Christina Lin, Lindsay Portela, Jennifer Waxman)

#### 2. UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

(Carly Anthony, Kylee Arbuckle, Olivia Dorey, Caitlyn Francis, Sarah Milliren, Abby O'Mara, Grace Rogers)

Competed through semi-finals: Baylor University (M. Appel, T. Brown, A. McGehee, P. Parker, J. Mitchell, S. Schaefer); University Of South Carolina (A. Henter, S. Kraus, K. McCormack, K. Schmidt, S. Smith).

Competed through second round: Southern Methodist University (M. Abbruzzese, A. Butterworth, J. Fischer, G. Hindle, P. Johnson, C. Line, S. Raposa, E. Roberts); South Dakota State University (M. Golden, J. Goodall, M. Schiffman, M. Violand, S. Wright); University Of Tennessee-Martin (K. Bergenty, K. Miranda, H. Ralston, R. Rickett, M. VanSelus); Texas A&M University (H. Buchmiller, M. Parker, K. Pickett, P. Russell, H. Williams).

Competed through first round: Kansas State University (S. Barnett, M. Finch, L. Laffey, M. Wayda, R. Webster, K. Yates); New Mexico State University (L. Bostwick, E. McConnell, A. Tassel, H. Swarthout); Oklahoma State University (S. Elser, S. Harrison, A. Joyce, A. Robbins, A. Rose, A. White); Texas Christian University (C. Ader, T. Alexander, H. Jacobi, K. Perry, D. Steigler).

second to her opponent, Anthony again. Patrick Rodes' ride-off course included a couple of bending lines, one rollback, a hand-gallop to an oxer, and a trot fence.

Anthony laid down a solid trip, with one error—she briefly trotted on course, and not just at the trot fence, resulting in scores of 55 from each judge.

"After Carly's round, I knew that I just had to put in a good course and try not to make any large mistakes that could make my score any lower than hers," Benson said. "That helped my mindset in the ride-off, but still, you don't want to let up at all. You don't want to think that you have it in the bag by any means, because it could be anybody's day, and anything can happen in any round. So I just tried to keep it together during schooling and to go into the ring feeling confident."

Benson picked up a steady gallop to the first fence and never deviated from that forward ride, despite having one



## ► Rookie NCEA Rider Sets A High Bar

**N**ot surprisingly, Elizabeth Benson of AU was named Most Outstanding Player in both the fences and flat realms at Nationals, garnering 16 single scores of which only three were under 91.

"I was thrilled, just thrilled," admitted Benson, who gave frequent and generous credit to the horses she rode. "I never thought Nationals would end as well as this. During home practices, we ran the flat tests pretty much every day, and I made some mistakes, like going off-pattern. So at Nationals, I wanted to be sure I would do the pieces correctly and do them well. After finishing second at the SEC Championship, our team came here with a little bit of a chip on our shoulder, so it was pretty exciting when we won."

Benson began riding at age 3 under the guidance of her trainer parents, Jack and Katie Benson of Briarwood Farms in New Jersey. At the end of her junior career last fall, while training with Stacia Madden (and managing to juggle a 17-hour courseload at AU along with team practices, varsity meets and traveling to U.S. Equestrian Federation shows), she won the Washington International Equitation Classic Final (D.C.), was fourth in the ASPCA Maclay Final and 10th in the

Pessoa/USEF Medal Final.

During the regular varsity season at AU, Benson's record was 8-2. In Equitation Over Fences, she was named an NCEA First-Team All-American, an SEC Freshman Rider of the Year, an All-SEC Equestrian, and an SEC All-Freshman Equestrian.

"As good of a rider as Elizabeth is, she's an even better kid," said AU hunter seat coach Jessica Braswell. "She's great academically, she's a good teammate, she works really hard, she's dedicated, and she's humble. On a horse, she's cool as a cucumber and pretty unflappable. All of those things contribute toward Elizabeth being successful in the ring."

Benson, who thinks she'll ride professionally after graduation, said it took some time to adjust to riding for a team after competing as an individual all her life. "When you enter the ring in college, everybody shouts your name, and they're excited," she said. "It's a whole different atmosphere. When you compete at [the prestigious USEF indoor shows], it's dead silent when you ride into the ring. But here, everybody's cheering and chanting when you go in, and that's a pretty cool feeling."

rail. The judges gave her an 86 and 84, respectively, enough to win the point for AU by a wide margin.

With the ride-off score now standing at 2-1 in AU's favor, the overall championship rested on the reining event. "I'm very superstitious," Benson admitted. "So after I finished the ride-offs, I went back to the barn, because I didn't want to watch Cheyenne [Cracraft], who was competing in reining for the deciding point. I just sat there with my fingers crossed, and Cheyenne won. So that was really exciting, because it meant we'd won the overall championship."

Not watching when big contests are on the line is only one of Benson's superstitious rituals. "I wear a lucky

nail polish [Revlon's "Stormy," a shade of gray], and if I do well on the first day, I like to wear the same attire, like the same socks," Benson said.

Superstitions aside, it's Benson's talent that makes her so accomplished in the ring, according to Braswell, who didn't hesitate to tap Benson to compete in both hunter seat phases of the ride-off.

"She has nerves of steel; she's been in those types of high-pressure situations throughout her junior career, and she'd been consistently outstanding at Nationals," said Braswell of Benson. "Even though Elizabeth is only a freshman, all week she'd gone and laid out mistake-free patterns on



► Tidbits

► **SINGLE SCORES OF 90 OR HIGHER** were earned by 11 riders: Carly Anthony, UGA; Kylee Arbuckle, UGA; Elizabeth Benson, AU; Hasbrouck Donovan, AU; Samantha Kraus, USC; Kimberly McCormack, USC; Paige Parker, BU; Schaefer Raposa, SMU; Grace Rogers, UGA; Samantha Schaefer, BU; and Jennifer Waxman, AU.

► **THE 2013 NCEA FIRST-TEAM ALL-AMERICANS** in equitation over fences are Samantha Schaefer (BU), Carly Anthony (UGA), Elizabeth Benson (AU) and Olivia Dorey (UGA); and in equitation on the flat are Samantha Schaefer (BU), Carly Anthony (UGA), Meredith Finch (KSU) and Demi Stiegler (Texas Christian University).

► **THE 2013 NCEA SECOND-TEAM ALL-AMERICANS** in equitation over fences are Rachel Webster (KSU), Alex Butterworth (SMU), Schaefer Raposa (SMU) and Courtney Line (SMU); and in equitation on the flat are Greer Hindle (SMU), Kara Bergenty (University of Tennessee-Martin), Mary Abbruzzese (SMU) and Caitlin Ader (TCU).

► **THE 2013 NCEA HONORABLE MENTION ALL-AMERICANS** in equitation over fences are Katherine Schmidt (USC), Allie Joyce (OSU), Amber Henter (USC), Jennifer Waxman (AU), Emily McConnell (New Mexico State University), Kali Yates (KSU), Andrea Robbins (OSU) and Kimberly McCormack (USC); and in equitation on the flat are Christina Lin (AU), Allie Joyce (OSU), Lauren Kerr (SDSU), Macy Wilson (Fresno State/California) and Katherine Schmidt (USC).



the flat and over fences. She rode with a great deal of confidence, and she has an incredible presence about her in the ring, which I think the judges noticed.

"There's not a type of horse that Elizabeth doesn't ride well," Braswell added. "Horses love her, so I felt confident that whatever horses were thrown at her, she'd continue to ride well and execute well. The most nervous I saw her get all week was when we did the coin toss to decide who would jump first and who would flat first in the ride-off. Elizabeth was more nervous about whether to call heads or tails than she'd been about anything else."

### Teamwork Pays Off

Braswell emphasized that AU's championships resulted from a team effort. The day before the finals, the AU hunter seat team defeated South Dakota State University with a score of 8-0 in the second round and beat No. 1 seed and defending hunter seat champion Baylor

University (Texas) with a score of 5-3 in the semi-finals.

"One thing that's really special about Auburn riders is that we're one team," Braswell said. "They truly believe in each other. With both our Western and hunter seat teams having to pull it out in the ride-off at the end, everything we'd discussed all year about unity came together to make sure that we were able to win overall."

"We'd had a tough loss in the [Southeastern Conference] championship a couple of weeks earlier," Braswell continued, alluding to AU's second-placed finish to the University of South Carolina in that event, "so I think the girls were really motivated after that to put in the time and practice hard. Coming into Nationals as the fourth seed in hunt seat, we knew we had to improve on some little mistakes from the SEC Championship."

During home practices, Braswell ran her riders through the flat patterns





for Nationals and organized some scrimmages “to create a little bit of a competitive environment,” she said. “We also jumped a lot of courses, but I didn’t want to change a lot of things, because I knew they were riding really well.”

Seven of AU’s 19 hunter seat riders competed at Nationals. “We changed up the roster a little bit in Waco, because all of our riders are so good and so talented,” Braswell said. “But I think every single rider believed in the four that were jumping or flatting at any given time, and that’s a big part of why this team is so successful.”

Benson agreed. “The support from team members, family members and everyone else definitely helped us win,” she said. “Since I’m a freshman, that kind of support has been a different feeling for me. On the second day of Nationals, our Western team lost to Oklahoma State University [which went on to defeat Kansas State University to win the Western championship], so

**Elizabeth Benson won both the over fences and flat phases for Auburn University’s hunt seat title, then led them to the overall victory in the ride-off.**

that was a heartbreaker because they wouldn’t be moving on. But they were always there, cheering on the hunt seat riders. And then it turned out that Western did compete one more time, in the ride-off, and helped us win the overall championship.”

Lindsay Portela of Southwest Ranches, Fla., is one of four AU hunter seat seniors graduating this spring. Portela, 21, scored the winning point in both of her flat outings (against UGA and BU) at Nationals. She also rode for AU the last time it won the overall title and hunter seat championship, in 2011.

“Our team really pulled it together. Everyone was on the same page. We have some very talented freshmen, and we put a lot of trust in them and in everyone else. We also have to credit the amazing team members who are working behind the scenes, some of whom never get a chance to compete on a horse for Auburn. They’re some of our biggest supporters, and they’re out there watching the rounds for us, day in and day out.”

Every night in Waco, the AU seniors would write a new quote on the board of their barn aisle. The final day, the quote was from world-class soccer champion Mia Hamm: “I am a member of the team, and I rely on the team. I defer to it and sacrifice for it, because the team, not the individual, is the ultimate champion.”

That quote, said the communications major Portela, “reflected the seniors’ goal this year of wanting the whole team to feel like they were a part of everything—Western, hunt seat, girls who compete and girls who never get to compete. Our team functions as a family, and I feel that everyone really bought into that quote and went into the championship round just fired up and ready to win.

“We not only work all year for this, but all of our lives,” Portela concluded. “If you win one of the [big equitation] finals, that’s great, but it’s an individual accomplishment. When you win here, it’s a team accomplishment, and that’s an amazing feeling. It’s something I’ll never forget.” ●