

Equitation Riders Celebrate Points Palooza at Vermont Summer Festival

Any rider with equitation finals on his or her 'to do' list can check off all the boxes at the Vermont Summer Festival, which runs for six weeks in the scenic Manchester area each summer. Thanks to weekly equitation offerings, as well as the extremely popular 'Equitation Tuesday' introduced in 2013, the Vermont Summer Festival has quickly made a name for itself among equitation riders and trainers as an 'Equitation Bootcamp' of sorts.

With opportunities to qualify for all the major finals, Tuesdays at Vermont are host to a frenzy of young riders and national champion hopefuls, all with the goal of preparing for year-end finals. Their hope is that the 'Equitation Tuesday' schedule, along with the equitation offerings taking place each week, will land them in the show rings for prestigious finals.

As finals season quickly approaches, take note of the following three riders! After successfully surviving the Vermont Summer Festival's 'Equitation Bootcamp', they are ones to watch this fall.

Jackie MacDonald



When Jackie MacDonald arrived at the Vermont Summer Festival, she was thinking the same thoughts that most 12-year-old girls have at the beginning of each summer break: "school is out and I have two months of freedom!". What she wasn't expecting was to have a break-out week in the show ring.

During the opening week of the Vermont Summer Festival, MacDonald won the THIS Children's Medal, the Pessoa/USEF Hunter Seat Medal, and the ASPCA Maclay, all on Equitation Tuesday.

"I was not expecting to do as well as I did," she said. "I have a great horse and a great team; that is what I am thankful for."

MacDonald, who trains with Cookie Desimone at Woodridge Farm in her hometown of Sherborn, MA, piloted her own ten-year-old Warmblood gelding named Crackerjack to all three ribbons. Crackerjack, or 'CJ' as MacDonald calls him, doubles as her jumper and equitation mount.

"I try to be a little more sophisticated with my riding," said MacDonald after admitting her focus is currently on equitation. "I have to mentally prepare myself so I don't make any mistakes. It is nice that those classes have their own day because you don't have to worry about anything else."

Thanks in part to her success in Vermont, MacDonald is qualified for the THIS National Children's Medal Finals, New England Equitation Championships, Pessoa/US Hunter Seat Medal Final, and ASPCA Maclay Finals. While the young rider is new to equitation finals, she has quickly mastered the art of perspective saying, "Putting in good trips at finals is all that matters."

Three things you may not know about Jackie MacDonald:

1. She is a third-generation equestrian. Her grandmother introduced her mother to riding who, in turn, put MacDonald and her sister, Allison, up on the backs of horses when they were five years old.
2. Her best horse memory is her first ride at a birthday party when she was three years old.
3. Her favorite food is sushi.

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Shannon Eckel



Shannon Eckel, 17, of Rockaway, NJ, travelled to the Vermont Summer Festival for the first time in six years with her trainer Frank Madden of Old Salem Farm. While balancing her responsibilities as a working student for Old Salem Farm, she ribboned in several equitation classes to qualify for

the Platinum Performance/USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals, the Pessoa/US Hunter Seat Medal Final, THIS National Children's Medal Finals, and ASPCA Maclay Finals.

"When you are starting to narrow down who is getting qualified in July and August, it is nice to have a day like Equitation Tuesday where you don't have to show in anything else and you are truly focused on your equitation horse, yourself, and that course," said Eckel. "You can take a deep breath."

With a knack for catch-riding, Eckel has enjoyed the challenge of not owning her own equitation horse.

"Every time I get on a horse I don't know it is nerve-wracking, but when you combine all the things you've learned with different horses it makes you a better rider," said Eckel. "They are just like people; they are all different in their own ways and knowing that pays off."

Most recently, Eckel was seventh in the Region 2 ASPCA Maclay Championship held at Old Salem Farm riding a horse she had known for less than a week.

Currently a senior at Pope John XXIII Regional High School in Sparta, NJ, Eckel has tunnel vision for horses and hopes to eventually ride professionally. Her next goal, however, is to ride for the University of South Carolina after she graduates.

Three things you may not know about Shannon Eckel:

1. She hates tomatoes!
2. She is an ice hockey fan and is not-so-patiently awaiting the start of NHL hockey season so she can root for the New Jersey Devils.
3. Her most embarrassing moment at a horse show was falling off into the open water. She still boasts blue stains on her belt, helmet, and crop.

Kendra Gierkink



Eighteen-year-old Kendra Gierkink is savoring her last few months as a junior rider and plans to make the most of her last year in the equitation ring. While spending three weeks at the Vermont Summer Festival alongside her trainers Missy Clark and John Brennan, as well as a large contingent of North Run riders, she secured spots in the Platinum Performance/USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals, Washington International Horse Show (WIHS)

Equitation Finals, Pessoa/US Hunter Seat Medal Final, and the ASPCA Maclay Finals.

"I have been riding in Vermont since I was doing the 2'6" and I think it was three years ago when I looked around and fell in love with the show because of how pretty it is," said Gierkink, who hails from Harpswell, ME. "Equitation Tuesday is such a great opportunity to get points and qualify."

While Gierkink was not short on success in Vermont this summer, she has big goals for finals this year, including plans for a redeeming performance at [Pessoa/USEF] Medal Finals.

"Last year I came back in sixth and my horse tripped after first jump and I had to circle," she explained. "I would like to go back and make it into the second round again. Also, I have never been to Washington before, so my goal this year was to make it and I was so happy to qualify."

Gierkink was second overall in the WIHS Equitation twice this summer in Vermont, which included a win in the Week IV jumper phase, helping her to accomplish her goal. She also saw success in the jumper ring while mastering the art of bouncing between disciplines.

"My equitation helps supplement the jumpers so much," she said. "It gets you in the ring a lot and has helped me to smooth everything out on my jumpers. I am really going to miss it next year."

Gierkink took a year off from studying to focus on her riding, and is now making college plans with hopes to attend Northwestern University.

Three things you may not know about Kendra Gierkink:

1. Her favorite phone application is Snapchat
2. When she isn't riding you can usually find her running.
3. Her funniest moment in the show ring occurred at the 2015 Vermont Summer Festival when she misjudged a distance to the final fence in a jumper class and crashed through it, but managed to hang on to her horse's neck through the times and finish on a four-fault score.

Photos: Jackie MacDonald and Crackerjack jumping to a blue ribbon at the Vermont Summer Festival.

Shannon Eckel competing in the New England Medal with Kiss Me Quick at the Vermont Summer Festival.

Kendra Gierkink and Captain Jack on their way to a top finish in the equitation ring at the Vermont Summer Festival.

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