



# Midwest Dressage Association

June 2021

## Necessary Conversations...

In the last year, the world has been having conversations that have been difficult. We have been asking questions that are uncomfortable – but necessary. These discussions have revolved around race, inclusion, and diversity. A common theme has been laced throughout all of this – bullying. When it comes down to it, we live in a society where being different be it a different color, sexual identification or preference, or race makes someone a target. Being “not the norm” or not mainstream or doing something that is even faintly against the grain puts one in a position to be ridiculed, maligned, marginalized, or otherwise discriminated against. Some of you may think it’s rather bold to lump bullying into the same category as discrimination but at the very heart of it all, it boils down to making a person feel less worthwhile because of a perceived difference or weakness.

And none of this is ok. None of this is right. And it’s not something that our organization will stand for. Not on my watch.

In my five months as President of the MDA I have questioned what kind of impact I want to have. The answer was made abundantly clear to me last weekend at a show and recent events have made it more so: We cannot allow others to belittle, malign or discriminate anyone. Not members of this organization or anyone else. To that end I challenge all of you – riders, trainers, parents, and show managers – to be proactive in stopping bullying and discrimination in our

sport. I challenge trainers to educate their students and clients and teach them that talking about other riders, trainers, and barns behind their backs is not acceptable and that our sport has room for everyone regardless of race, gender, or religion. I challenge parents to supervise their children’s behavior at shows, online, and at the barn to ensure that they learn about sportsmanship and fair play. I challenge show managers to do everything in their power to make their shows inclusive for everyone regardless of race or ability. This includes making Para classes available to those who have the need. And to riders: Exhibit fairness, morality, and tolerance. When you are at a show be gracious, be kind, and rise above speaking negatively about others or engaging in petty gossip. Be the kind of rider – the kind of competitor that this organization and our sport as a whole can be proud of.

This kind of change is long overdue in my opinion. So many in our sport seem to think that schoolyard behavior and prejudice are acceptable because they have prevailed in our sport for so long. Well you know what – it’s not ok. And it never has been. For some reason we have come to accept this behavior as “just the way it is in Dressage.” Using that excuse is the ultimate scapegoat, and one that has been used for far too long.

So what can we do? How can we improve? Well, for one thing we can take to heart the old adage that if you don’t have anything nice to say then don’t say anything at all. It seems so simple,

doesn't it? Not saying anything oftentimes speaks volumes about one's character. Include and learn: Most often the reason exclusion happens is because we don't bother to learn about others – their cultures, their heritage, their disabilities. Learning about what makes a person different is the key to understanding them. Most importantly, be kind. Be supportive, be generous in spirit, and be a model representative of your sport, your barn, and yourself.

Status quo is working anymore, nor should it. As our culture and society evolve, we must as well. It's not just our bodies and our horses that need training, it's our minds and our hearts. This is the kind of change I want to help make. This is the kind of evolution that I want to promote. And this a legacy that we all can be a part of.

-Allison



## USDF Statement on Equality and Inclusivity

The United States Dressage Federation™ (USDF) is proud to represent all of its members, be a resource for the dressage community, and to support inclusivity in all aspects of sport.

As the world comes together during this pivotal time for civil rights, so too must the equine community. USDF stands firmly in support of the principles of equality and inclusivity in the organization and sport. Any form of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, etc. is in direct opposition to these principles and has no place within the organization. USDF supports our members, barn family, fans, and followers of all races, ethnicities, ages, genders, and

sexualities.

In a sport where the goal is constant and progressive improvements, we must strive to do the same in our personal lives and within our organization. In every ride down the centerline, every group of friends gathering for dressage education, every tragedy and triumph, the dressage community is stronger together.

## **Foals!!!**

Remember the last issue when I asked everyone for pics of their foals? And I implied that I was

expecting a couple of my own? Well they have arrived! Balmoral AMS, and pony filly and River AMS, a Hanoverian/Oldenburger colt are happily running around my farm. And we also have a submission from Nancy Bryant of baby pics of her horse Ritchie. So enjoy the unbridled joy of baby horses!!



Balmoral AMS owned and bred by Allison McKenzie (TB/Westfalen)



River AMS owned and bred by Allison McKenzie (Hanoverian/Oldenburger)



Ritchie, owned and loved by Nancy Bryant

**We would love to print your baby pictures! Send them to [amsporthorses@yahoo.com](mailto:amsporthorses@yahoo.com)**

## **MDA Bootcamp a Huge Success!**

The 2021 Bootcamp was a ginormous success! After having to take a hiatus last year due to Covid, Will Davis put together a fantastic training weekend at his new training home, owned by Carole Grant in Fenton. Instructors included some of the participants of our Instructor Certification Program, Will Davis himself, and other Michigan trainers. The weather was absolutely beautiful, and participants were treated to great food and superb education. The legendary Carole Grant offered a classroom session reiterating the

Training Scale and answering questions from eager students. Another session included yoga for riders, which was a big hit. On Saturday Will presented one of his quizzes to participants – and stumped a lot of people. Many thanks to Will for the selfless task of organizing

Bootcamp every year and being a tireless



supporter of MDA!

## **USEF COVID-19 Action Plan Update: To Provide Increased Flexibility in a Rapidly Changing Environment**

**Going forward, competitions must operate in accordance with state and local requirements. In the absence of state or local requirements, USEF recommends compliance with CDC guidelines.**

Dear US Equestrian members,

Thank you for your patience as competition organizers across the country are transitioning to new COVID-19 protocols resulting from recent updates to CDC guidelines and federal, state, and local regulations. Close on the heels of the CDC amendments last Thursday, several states and local jurisdictions have announced upcoming changes which will be enacted over the next few weeks. USEF also issued a [communication](#) on Friday, May 14, to quickly adjust face-covering/mask requirements for fully vaccinated individuals, pending a full update to the COVID-19 Action Plan.

Effective today, we have released a new edition of the **USEF COVID-19 Action Plan for Licensed Competitions**, which has been updated to provide increased flexibility in a rapidly changing environment. Going forward, competitions must operate in accordance with state and local requirements. In the absence of state or local requirements, USEF recommends compliance with CDC guidelines. In an effort to mitigate the risk of spreading COVID-19, competition organizers can impose more restrictive requirements if they so choose.

With these changes come the heightened need for personal responsibility and continuation of the exemplary effort by our community to reduce the effects of the pandemic and keep our sport operating.

Three critical things to remember as we go forward:

- Competition organizers remain responsible for posting all COVID-19 requirements under which their competition will operate.
- All persons attending USEF competitions are responsible for reviewing and complying with the COVID-19 requirements in effect at each



competition. This is vital, as requirements may vary between competitions.

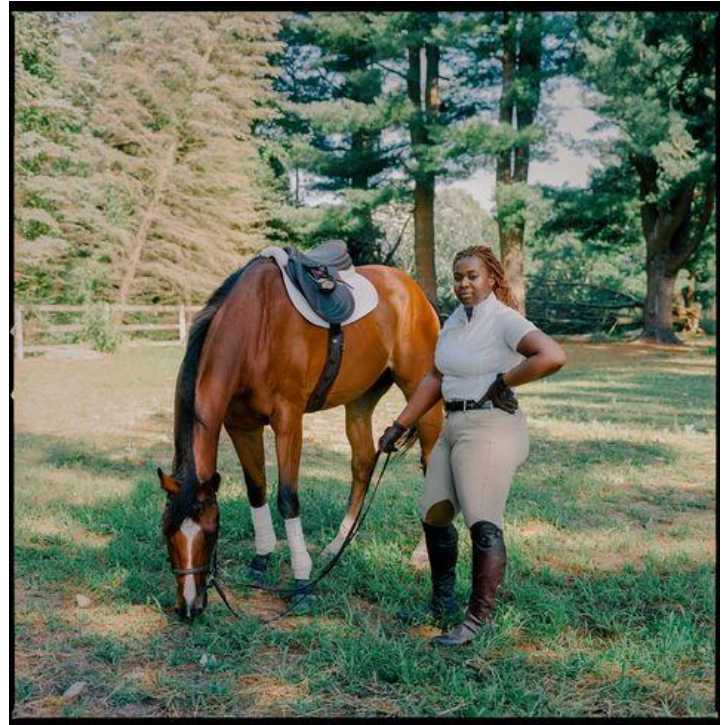
- Individuals may choose to wear a face covering/mask even when not required. Anyone choosing to do so will not be penalized.

The last 15 months have challenged us all, but we have persevered. Equestrian sport was one of the first to resume operations last spring, and due to our community's commitment and resolve, we were able to keep competitions going. Thank you to all of you who have dedicated yourselves to ensuring equestrian sport continues to thrive.

Be safe, enjoy your horses, and please be patient as competition organizers make adjustments based on the new edition of the USEF COVID-19 Action Plan.



RITA OMOKHA



***Shaquilla "Shaq" Blake at Pine Hill Farm in Taunton, Massachusetts.***

**CELESTE SLOMAN**

At 10 a.m., it's already as hot as midday. Shaquilla "Shaq" Blake, a rising Black equestrian, finishes feeding the horses at a stable in Massachusetts as part of her student work in exchange for riding lessons. Wearing black breeches and a T-shirt that proclaims "Coffee" in AC/DC font, she squints at the rising sun.

Mornings at the big gray barn start with feedings and end with cleanings. It's a picturesque scene: The horses—mostly quarters, and some Arabians, Shetlands, and Connemaras—are hosed down with cool water. Everyone gathers around back by the red picnic tables. There, Blake sits with five other barn workers—all of them white. Under the shade,

***Who Gets to Be an Equestrian?  
In the elite, predominantly white world of horseback riding, Black women face a painful set of challenges.***

the air thick with the scent of manure, they take a moment to catch their breath before the day's trail rides begin. As Blake cools off, she feels a tug at her dreadlocks. "Can you feel that?" a giddy voice says from behind her. It belongs to a 13-year-old girl whose profile matches what Blake calls "your typical equestrian"—namely, wealthy and white. *Can I feel that?? Of course I can! You just yanked the hell out of my dreads!*



**CELESTE SLOMAN PHOTO CREDIT**

This wasn't the first time Blake felt unwelcome in the sport she loves. At that barn, where she no longer rides, she heard fellow riders use the *n*-word in front of her. Another time, "Some kids were talking, and one of them goes, 'Do you smoke pot?' " she recalls. "And the other one was like, 'No, I don't smoke pot! You think I'm a poor Black person?' "

Once, these comments may not have ricocheted beyond the horse-world bubble. But like many elite, largely white institutions—prep schools, opera, theater—the equestrian world is facing its own reckoning with racism. A week after the murder of George Floyd, 17-year-old rider Sophie Gochman, who is white, penned an online essay for the horse-world magazine *The Chronicle of the Horse*. "We are

an insular community with a gross amount of wealth and white privilege, and thus we choose the path of ignorance," she wrote. A white trainer, Missy Clark, composed a rebuttal. "In our world, some choices are forced because they're based on the cold hard fact most people can't afford to do this. It doesn't mean that it's fair," she wrote, "but it also doesn't mean that it's discrimination." Their exchange prompted Lauryn Gray to submit her own story to the publication. The 17-year-old Canadian jumper, who is of mixed race, wrote that "my barn and the circuit I compete on have always been an extremely loving and accepting environment, but...I realize that the same can't be said about our community as a whole."

When people talk about the equestrian world in America, they're usually referring to the one governed by the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) and tied to major national competitions—and Olympic dreams. The costs to get into the sport (and advance to higher levels), however, are steep, when it comes to both money and time. For example, buying an average amateur horse will set you back \$5,000 to \$20,000 and up. A top-rated competition like the 12-week-long Wellington horse shows (the Winter Equestrian Festival and the Adequan Global Dressage Festival) in Wellington, Florida, aka the winter equestrian capital of the world, could cost from \$10,000 to \$65,000 when you factor in the entry fee and the costs of stabling and care. If the dream includes competing at the upper-elite international level with a top horse, add upwards of another \$500,000. The average USEF member owns four horses, has an annual income of \$185,000, and has a net worth of \$955,000. The median household income in America is a little over \$60,000 (for Black families, it's \$41,511). Members of the elite club of top-level riders include the children of Michael Bloomberg, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Bruce Springsteen.

Finances aside, once you've ventured into the sport, it's a whole other hurdle for Black people, especially women. "If you're not one of them," says Tayla Moreau of Pine Hill Farm, Blake's adult amateur trainer, "it's not like everyone welcomes you with open arms." Black riders make up less than 1 percent of the USEF, and a Black equestrian has never competed for the U.S. in the Olympics.

Blake, who spends her days as the lead audio/visual technician at the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston, found ways to make it on her own dime, like buying an off-track Thoroughbred horse. She's also a working student at Pine Hill Farm in Taunton, Massachusetts, and recently joined USEF (where 89 percent of the members are white and make six figures a year on average) as a "fan member" for \$25 annually.

When Blake was first looking into farms, she went on a group trail ride at one barn. Immediately afterward, someone from the barn texted her, saying, "After reviewing [our] lessons and horses available, we do not have the appropriate lesson program to accommodate what you are looking for." Confused after what she thought was a pleasant riding experience, Blake had a white friend request lessons. And they immediately told her "Absolutely!" Asking around later, she heard that barn had a reputation for not wanting low-income people or people of color to train there.



**Scnobia Stewart**  
**HEIDI BEE PHOTOGRAPHY LLC**

Scnobia Stewart, a jumper from North Carolina, experienced something similar when she participated in a two-day clinic with Olympian Lendon Gray at a private stable in North Carolina. The 26-year-old worked hard at her Orange County Animal Services day job to save around \$800 to travel to the clinic and stable her Dutch Harness horse, Zima. One morning as she braided Zima's mane, a middle-aged white woman (who Stewart says didn't work there or attend the clinic) walked up to her and asked if she was there to braid all the horses' manes. "She looked at me [like I'm] 'the help,'" Stewart says. "It wasn't the first time [this] had happened to me, and I didn't want to cause a scene. I let her know that the horse was mine and I was one of the riders in the clinic." The woman looked at her in disbelief. After sizing up Stewart a moment longer, she walked away.





**Philesha Chandler**  
**ANNAN HEPNER**

Philesha Chandler, a Black dressage competitor from Florida, learned the hard way how alone Black people can feel in the sport. When she was a working student at a Kansas riding-lesson and boarding stable, she wasn't treated like her white fellow riders, and they never stood up for her. White students at the barn were assigned the typical duties associated with a horse barn: tacking, cleaning stalls, feeding and grooming horses, painting fences. Her trainer would ask Chandler to clean her house: sweep and mop the floors, clean the bathrooms, and wash the dishes.

"It was one of those 'What?' moments," Chandler says. "For the trainer to feel I was the best choice for her house chores because of the color of my skin—I was hurt." Still, she never spoke up, for fear of losing access to the barn and its horses. "There are so many times I experienced racial prejudice in this sport," she says, that she eventually grew numb. Now a dressage trainer with her own business, she prioritizes mentoring Black kids interested in dressage. "I want them to know that we belong here, and they can do this."

Veteran show jumper Donna M. Cheek remembers coming up in the '70s, and microaggressions that were not so micro. "People didn't want to recognize me because of

my skin color," she remembers. Competing as a hunter—scored at the judge's discretion—Cheek would get very low marks compared to her white counterparts. "After races, people would tell me, 'That wasn't right,'" she says. As a young rider, Cheek often felt unwelcome in riding circles. A white rider she trained with once invited Cheek over to her home for a pool party. Moments after she arrived, her friend's mom said, "You know how I feel about these people," and pointed at Cheek. "I wasn't part of their world, and they made it clear," she says now.



**BRITTANY ANZEL APP PHOTO CREDIT**

Her parents received their share of discrimination on their daughter's behalf. A top trainer from a private riding club in California was interested in working with Cheek. "The trainer was very forthright with my parents and told them, 'She's really good, but there's no way she would be invited into the riding club to train or take a clinic.' And my parents didn't tell



me about that until decades later.” She says if she could have trained there, that kind of access would have been a game changer.



**MIKAYLA MARKS PHOTO CREDIT**

Despite the challenges, Cheek went on to become the first Black rider to represent the United States in the 1981 World Show Jumping Championships and the first equestrian inducted into the Women’s Sports Hall of Distinction in 1997. She’s now a trainer in Paso Robles, California, and she says there’s still so much work to be done to make the sport more welcoming toward Black people. Now she’s one of those asking the question, How can the future of the sport change so that Black girls who dream of riding can actually participate?

For the sport to truly enter a new chapter, Black riders say, it must start from within: USEF needs to step up. Riders want to see

themselves in magazines, on television screens, and in industry-wide promotions. Investing in inner cities with higher minority populations is also crucial. “If you can’t see people who look like you doing it, living it, how can you dream of becoming that thing?” Blake says.



**Jordan Allen  
TAYLOR PENCE/US EQUESTRIAN**

“People need to be exposed to stories like mine,” says top rider Jordan Allen. “That you can do this and not have all the money.” Allen started riding when she was 7; by 10, her talent caught the eye of well-known trainer Kim Carey. She recommended Allen for the prestigious training center Ashland Farms, where she became a working student. “[Riding at Ashland] exposed me to other barns and to other people giving me horses,” she adds. Without mentorship, scholarship, and access, getting to the top may not have been possible. Allen counts herself lucky: She won the Overall Grand Champion title (in the 3’6” section) at the USEF Junior Hunter National Championship. But the 19-year-old is usually one of the few Black riders at horse shows and is the only Black athlete on her University of South Carolina equestrian team. Young Black girls reach out to her on Instagram to tell her she’s an inspiration. It’s important for them, she says, to “see me out there.”

USEF says it’s doing the work needed to make the sport inclusive and fair. “The experiences

recently shared with us by Black members of our community are heartbreaking and deeply troubling,” said CEO Bill Moroney in a statement to ELLE. “They were also a wake-up call, and we now see US Equestrian has not been a strong enough ally for Black equestrians—especially Black women.” The federation is pledging to provide a special performance-based grant for riders; enact financial support programs that give access and promote education within the industry; implement mandatory antiracist and unconscious bias training for USEF’s staffers and board; and include more Black women in marketing materials. “It’s important that people see themselves,” says Vicki Lowell, USEF’s chief marketing and content officer. “I’m happy that USEF is paying attention and trying to make changes,” Blake says. “I hope it’s lasting change and not just something for the moment.” Meanwhile, she’s raising awareness about the lack of diversity on her blog, *theblackequestrian*. “It’s going to take all of us staying strong and fighting for the sport we love,” she says.

But that morning outside the barn, she felt all the pressure of being one of the few. Used to double takes and dealing with discriminatory comments, she knew she could handle a little white girl—though she really wanted to scream. “Can you feel this?” the girl asked, pulling harder the second time, making Blake’s head jerk back. Her blood rising, Blake reminded herself where she was and who she was around. “I’ve learned to come off as nonthreatening as possible,” she says, “whitewashing myself in a way, so that people are comfortable around me.”

“Yes, I can feel that,” she calmly told her, smiling. “Now stop touching my hair.”

***This article appears in the October 2020 issue of ELLE.***

## ***I Experienced Bullying – If It Can Happen To Me, It Can Happen To Anyone***

Recently I was at a local schooling show with two of my horses and a smattering of students. I love schooling shows, this one in particular, because it is such an inviting space to introduce young, green horses and inexperienced students to the sport of Dressage – my chosen sport – the sport that I love. I am known as a trainer that works with a lot of OTTB’s – I love the breed; I love retraining them and starting them off on what is likely to be a life-long career. It is important to me that these horses receive the critical foundation that will serve them for the rest of their sporting lives. But I also understand that not a lot of other trainers want to dedicate their careers to this endeavor and that some of these horses can be somewhat...spirited at their first shows off of the track. It certainly isn’t a job for the faint of heart. But I am proud of what I do and I above all loves these horses and love their souls.

Unfortunately not all trainers are created equal. Not all trainers are willing to be encouraging and supportive. And some trainers can be just plain mean. A fellow trainer watched me school a young Thoroughbred who had a few moments of anxiousness and then proceeded to make disparaging comments about my horses to her gaggle of followers within earshot of my husband. Later, she made equally negative comments about my student, a junior rider, who was riding my own pony, saying that my student had no business being on such a naughty pony (she went on to win both of her classes on that naughty pony the next day, for the record.)

As a trainer, I have had to develop a pretty thick skin – all of us have. And most of it is because back-stabbing, gossiping, and overt bullying are rampant in our sport. We have resigned

ourselves to it by shrugging our shoulders and explaining “that’s just how it is in horse sports.” But the thing is – it’s not.

According to Sportsconflict.org “Bullying is the use of verbal abuse, intimidation, humiliation or threats practiced by individuals or groups in order to exert some amount of power over others. It can be overt and extreme in nature or take effect subtly over time. Bullying in sports takes all forms and has been commonplace for decades.”



*Carly Stewart stealing some rides on The Dastardly Pony himself!*

I want my sport to do better. I want my peers to do better. And I am starting in my own barn.

When I teach young riders and those new to the sport about Dressage I focus on the classical aspects – the long-held traditions of training that help improve our horse’s way of going and improve our riding. But I realize that there is more to this sport than just the riding and training. I have a responsibility to my students to help them to understand that this sport, like any other, requires teamwork,

personal responsibility, and maturity. I teach them that being supportive of other riders is just as important as being proud of yourself. I want my students to know that every other rider out there faces struggles and has hard times and that if we lift one another up we help ourselves grow and our sport evolve.



*Learning about teamwork and support from the very start*

It is our duty as trainers to teach our newbies to the sport – and even our existing tried and true warriors - that status quo cannot be the way equestrian sports continue to operate. While the USEF has Safe Sport to address a variety of issues ranging from sexual misconduct to bullying, it largely focuses on minors in our sport and doesn’t always address the harm that adults can do to one another. So what can we do? We can start with the 3 S’s:

- Stand Up, Speak Up, and Support! Be proactive when you hear or see someone being bullied. Don’t be afraid to address it. A simple mention to show management can go a long way. It is in the show managers best interest to create an environment that is pleasant and supportive for trainers and



competitors. Don't assume that they can't or won't help you or address and situation of bullying.

Support your fellow riders – a “good job” or “have a nice ride” as a competitor exits or enters the warm-up can go a long way. One of my proudest moments as a trainer was seeing one of my students offer to move her ride times to help out an obviously nervous rider who was having trouble with her horse while another offered her words of encouragement.

There is nothing stopping this sport from operating under the same idea of

“teamwork” that many other sports do. The fact that we compete as individuals sometimes makes us forget that we are still part of a larger team – a greater framework of people that share one thing – a love of Dressage. If we continue to remind ourselves of that then we can build a better foundation for our sport – and our participants.

## The Encore Award

### *A Way to Recognize Off The Track Thoroughbreds in Dressage...*



*The Encore Award is presented through the Midwest Dressage Association on behalf of Allison and Jeremy McKenzie, Joan Gaughan, and in memory of Jack Gaughan, who loved Thoroughbreds more than any other breed.*

*It is awarded to the rider/horse combination that achieves the highest average score at any level, Introductory through Grand Prix in any one season. The scores may be received at either schooling or recognized shows. To qualify the horse/rider combination must have at least three scores from three different judges, one of those scores being from the highest test of the level being ridden.*

*Please Provide:*

*-A copy of the horses Jockey Club papers or lip tattoo that includes the original JC name*

*-Riders MDA number*

*-Copy of test scores*

*Mail submissions to:*

*Allison McKenzie Sporthorses*

*9867 Sharon Hollow Road*

*Manchester, MI 48158*

## **Show Schedule 2021**

### **July**

**10 – Wyn Farm Dressage Schooling Show**

**10/11 – Woodbine Dressage Schooling Show**

**16-18 – Dressage at Waterloo July**

**24 – Dressage Schooling Show at Brilliant Reflection Farm**

**31-Aug. 1 – Michigan Summer Dressage at Wyn Farm**

### **August**

**6-8 – Dressage at Waterloo August**

**8 – Grosse Pointe Equestrian Schooling Show**

**14/15 – Wyn Farm Dressage Schooling Show**

**19/20 – Dressage at Waterloo Summer Finale I**

**21/22 – Dressage at Waterloo Summer Finale II**

**28 – Dressage Schooling Show at Brilliant Reflection Farm**

**29 – Woodbine Dressage Schooling Show**

### **September**

**3-5 – Schooling Show Regional Championships**

**10-12 – Dressage at Waterloo Autumn Classic I and II**

**11 – Wyn Farm Dressage Schooling Show**

**19 – Woodbine Dressage Schooling Show**

**26 – Grosse Pointe Dressage Schooling Show**

### **October**

**7-10 – GAIG/USDF Region 2 Championships at the Kentucky Horse Park**

