

USA vs. South Africa Saddle Seat Invitational

By Megan McClure

Being given the opportunity to represent your country while competing in the sport that you love, is an incredible honor that many dream of but few ever achieve. In October, 12 of the industry's best young riders made their way to Uniondale, South Africa to do just that in the Saddle Seat Invitational Event between the United States and South Africa. Organized every two years by the Jacobs family Brent, Jane, and Brooke the event alternates between the two countries so that both have the chance for home court advantage. The event consisted of two days of competition, in which the rider would show two different horses on the rail and perform a pattern. At the end of the second day, the results would be announced as to which country was the winner. The South African team members graciously provided their own show horses, as well as finding another horse for the teams to use.

There are two teams in the Invitational Event, the Three- and Five-Gaited, made up of six riders each. Making up the Three-Gaited team was Emily Abbott, Rachel Machamer, Emma Nichols, Eleanor Watkins, Ellen Medley Wright and Toria Hecht, serving as captain. The members of the Five-Gaited Team were Lindsay Haupt, Sarah Beth Longworth, Brittany McGinnis, Jessica Moctezuma, Kelsey Olsen and Jacquelyn Ware, captain. The Jacobs family invited the girls to be a part of the teams in the spring of 2007, which enabled them to not only get familiar with each other to build a true team mentality, but also to prepare for the challenge of equitating on new and different horses in a foreign country.

The depth of the team's talent is easily recognizable as there are many world and national champions included. Both Toria Hecht and Jackie Ware credited their teammates talents and attitudes for making their job as captain even more rewarding and enjoyable.

The team, along with their coaches and supporters, arrived at Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C., on Friday October 5, wearing their matching track suits ready to go. The flight to Johannesburg, SA was 15 hours, so everyone came prepared with magazines, books, homework, Ipods, and sleep aids. The flight wasn't nearly as unbearable as some (mostly me) had predicted and we arrived in South Africa on Saturday afternoon. After arriving in our hotel in Johannesburg, the group was able to take some time to relax before heading to Tribes, a restaurant adjacent to our hotel. It was here that the group had the first real chance to mingle, as parents and riders got to know each other better. The opportunity to



Brooke Jacobs (Coach), Sarah Beth Longworth (5 Gt), Rachel Machamer (3 Gt), Lindsay Haupt (5 Gt), Ellen Medley Wright (3 Gt), Emily Abbott (3 Gt), Jackie Ware (5 Gt), Jessica Moctezuma (5 Gt), Emma Nichols (3 Gt), Toria Heck (3 Gt), Kelsey Olson (5 Gt), Brittany McGinnis (5 Gt), Eleanor Watkins (3 Gt), Brent Jacobs (Coach).

sample South African cuisine was also presented as kudu, impala, ostrich, and warthog were some of the dishes ordered. After dinner it was back to our rooms to prepare for the travels that awaited us the next day.

The next morning we awoke, ate breakfast in our hotel, and made our way to a street market where we were able to purchase some souvenirs. After spending a few hours browsing and shopping, we returned to the airport. This time, we flew to Port Elizabeth on South Africa's southwest cape. It was here that we met the South African team who accompanied us through the remainder of the trip. After collecting our luggage, which was quite a feat with at least one suitcase for everyone, as well as 12 large saddlebags, we boarded a bus that would take us to Jeffrey's Bay, an Indian Ocean coastal town. This city is well-known for its excellent wave conditions and attracts surfers from across the world.

It was at this point in the trip that the US team and their support system were given a surprise—cold weather! Everyone planned for spring like days, but instead, South Africa was going through a spell of colder than normal weather and almost everyone was unprepared. To add to this, from this point on, we didn't stay in hotels with heat. Ironically, since South Africa was going into their spring season, winter wear was few and far between in the stores we visited. Everyone was a wonderful sport about the situation, and I felt it added to the experience and

helped bring everyone closer together as we froze.

While in Jeffrey's Bay, we were able to experience the town's shops and beach, as well as area restaurants. We were also to have our first real African experience as we went on a game drive to view different kinds of wildlife. While the animals are wild, they were contained for their own protection and preservation. On this game drive we saw zebra, rhino, giraffe, buffalo, different types of birds, and several species of deer, including the springbok, the mascot of South Africa's national rugby team. This experience was definitely a highlight for many on the trip, as it was exciting to be able to see the animals in their more natural habitat. When the game drive was over, we were treated to a wonderful meal at the home of the owner of the preserve.

The next day we were on the road again, this time heading to Oudtshoorn, where we would experience more of what South Africa had to offer. Upon our arrival, we headed to the Cango Caves. The caves were first officially explored in the 19th century but scientists believe that they have provided shelter for over 80,000 years. Being about five kilometers in length, the caves are still full of mystery. The only cave drawings in South Africa found in a completely dark area are within the caves, as well as other natural wonders. The group was able to take a guided tour of the caves, allowing us to leave informed and in awe.

We were also able to visit the Cango



The show ring in South Africa.

Wildlife Ranch while in Oudtshoorn, which provided a once-in-a-lifetime experience for some. In addition to seeing all types of wildlife such as crocodiles, several species of birds, lemurs, lions, cheetahs, tigers, and pygmy hippos, some guests were able to get one on one with some of the big cats. Many took the chance to have their picture taken with either a male or female cheetah, three baby tigers, or two baby cheetahs. It was without a doubt one of the highlights of the trip for many and thankfully we all have the pictures to prove it to everyone back home!

On Wednesday, after eating breakfast with the South African team, we all headed to an ostrich farm to learn more about large, flightless birds we had seen so often on our trip. At the farm, we learned that ostrich leather is one of the strongest in the world, second only to kangaroo, and that the eggs are strong enough to support the weight of a grown man. We were able to feed an ostrich and see how the males and females interacted with each other and their babies. At the end of our tour, we were all able to witness, and some experienced, ostrich riding. Many of the US riders and a few from the South African team hopped aboard an ostrich to take it for a short spin around its pen. It was without a doubt one of the funniest and best experiences of the trip.

When we were done at the ostrich farm, it was back on the bus for the trip to our final South African destination. We arrived at the Mountain Pastures Private Game Reserve that afternoon and were greeted with warm hospitality and a delicious lunch. Mountain Pastures is a beautiful retreat in Uniondale that offers many different encounters with

nature, including game drives, hikes and four-wheeler excursions. After our lunch, the riders and coaches were off to the horse show grounds for their first riding practice.

At this practice, they would determine what rider would ride what horse in the first day of competition. During practice the following day, the two teams would switch horses, and again pair the most well-suited horses and riders. While the riders were away at the show grounds, their parents and supporters stayed behind at Mountain Pastures to enjoy the scenery.

Thursday marked the second day of practice for the riders and allowed the remainder of group to decide how to spend their day. Some went the show grounds to watch the Uniondale Horse Show, others visited the buffalo breeding grounds, and later, others hiked to see the San art drawn on cave walls over 40,000 years ago. Later that evening, the group rejoined to get ready to head into town for the opening ceremony. A wonderful dinner was provided as all team members and coaches were introduced. The teams had a short time to visit with each other and wish good luck to all before we headed back to Mountain Pastures to get ready for the next day.

The following morning, we all headed to the show grounds to prepare to cheer on our talented riders. The competition was mixed into the show, so we all were able to watch regular classes to see how they compared to those in the United States. Each rider completed their railwork and pattern, handling the unfamiliar surroundings and horses in a confident and professional fashion, making everyone extremely proud.

The second and final day of competition was quickly underway and all riders continued the trend of riding hard for the win. Performing even stronger that day, they completed their second railwork and pattern aboard their second group of horses. Once the competition was over, everyone returned to Mountain Pastures to prepare for the closing ceremonies and dinner/dance that would follow. We anxiously arrived at the show grounds, ready to hear the results of the event. First announced was the placing of the Three-Gaited team, and after what seemed like an eternity, it was declared that the US was the winner! There was an abundance of applause and cheers from the American group before we all quieted down to hear the results for the Five-Gaited teams. This time the placings were reversed as the South African team earned the gold and the US the silver. Everyone was extremely proud of the American riders and all received equal amounts of support and cheers.

After the ceremony, the teams and supporters, horse show exhibitors and spectators, gathered for a dinner and dance. It was a wonderful way to end the competition as medals and scores were forgotten and a good time was had by all.

The next morning it was time to say goodbye to Mountain Pastures, something everyone had been dreading after falling in love with the beautiful surroundings and hospitable staff. During our stay, we enjoyed all of the excursions Mountain Pastures offered, and we also made a new friend. Lamby, the pet lamb of the owners, won the hearts of everyone. Saved during a fire, Lamby, was more like a dog than a sheep as he came when called and was known to beg for attention.

After breakfast we gathered our things and said our goodbyes to make our way to the town of George where we would fly to Johannesburg. From there it was an 18 hour flight back to Washington, D.C., where we would all say our goodbyes and go our separate ways. Everyone was excited to return home but also saddened by the realization that our trip had come to an end.

Aside from being able to participate in or witness an international saddle seat competition, the trip to South Africa also created experiences and memories that would be impossible to recreate. Riders who are accustomed to showing against one another came together as teams to compete in the sport they love and represent their country. Whether it was going on game drives or suffering through the cold together, this trip brought many people together who may not have had the chance otherwise. It could be considered the trip of a lifetime and that is what it provided a lifetime of friendships and memories.