



Addie Grace Akins, left, Caroline Kirkland, center, and Rachel Harper, right, all 15-year-old students at Northridge High School have recently earned the distinction of High School Equestrian Athlete for the U.S. Equestrian Federation program for the 2014-15 year.



Addie Grace Akins, 15, from Northridge High School. She trains with Ashley Morrison at Westminster Farms with her horse, Belle.

They are an unofficial Jaguars team of three, a trio of Northridge High School students who have recently lettered in the sport of equestrian.

Rachel Harper, who will be a junior this fall, and upcoming sophomores Addie Grace Akins and Caroline Kirkland are a part of the United States Equestrian Federation's Equestrian Athlete Lettering Program. As most schools nationwide, including Northridge, do not field equestrian teams, the program is designed to acknowledge the time, training, and accomplishments young equestrians make in their sport. The hope is it will help encourage them to continue their equestrian pursuits, long into adulthood. It is open to USEF members in grades 5-12.

All three train out of Westminster Farm where the owner, Ashley Morrison, also serves as their riding instructor and coach.

"Parents received a postcard in the mail about the program from the USEF. We liked the idea. And they were already doing everything it required to earn a letter," said Cindy Kirkland, Caroline's mother.

"A lot of schools don't offer equestrian riding, so it's a way that they can take all the hours that they've worked and put it towards something at school and be recognized for it," Morrison said. "I knew about it, but the mothers were the ones who really got involved and made it work for their children. It requires a lot of hours, just like a normal sport would. The mothers kept up with all the hours for each child, noting it, and then I would check over it. They did all the work sending it in."

In order for students to letter, participants must log 100 hours of riding or training and compete in a minimum of three events between June 1 and May 31. Prospective letter winners can compete at whatever levels and disciplines they chose. They can join at any time, as long as they complete the

requirements within that time frame. They can also earn credit retroactively for past years they may have missed. To acknowledge their achievement, the three each received an official USEF letterman's patch, lapel pin, and a certificate of achievement. "It's really exciting to get the letter because it makes you realize that you've accomplished so much within a year," Harper said.

"We encourage the recognition of young equestrian athletes who are dedicating themselves to a sport that requires tremendous training and preparation for competition," Terra Schroeder, National Affiliates Representative of the USEF, wrote in a statement to the Tuscaloosa News. "Equestrian athletes take the concept of teamwork to the highest level as they form a partnership with a horse: two independent beings working together and communicating with one another to achieve an overall goal."

Indeed, it's that additional teammate that separates equestrians from their fellow student-athletes. They purchase, clean, gather, and put up their own equipment. And the teammate they count most upon has four legs and a mind and personality of its own.

While Harper and Kirkland were new to the program, Akins participated in a similar USEF-supported program offered in Birmingham the year before.

"I did an interscholastic riding team," Akins said of the program for middle schoolers. "I drove up to Birmingham every Wednesday after school. On weekends we would go to shows. You didn't get to take your own horse. You had to draw for a horse and hope for the best."

All three have made an impact nationally. In August, Kirkland made her third career trip to compete in the national US Pony Finals, her second there with her pony, Winnie, a participant in the hunter, large pony division. Akins, who is also



(Left) Rachel Harper, 15, from Northridge High School. She trains with Ashley Morrison at Westminster Farms with her horse, Johnny. (Right) Caroline Kirkland, 15, from Northridge High School. She trains with Ashley Morrison at Westminster Farms with her pony, Winnie. (Bottom) Rachel Harper, left, Caroline Kirkland, center, and Addie Grace Akins, right, all 15 year old students at Northridge High School have recently earned the distinction of High School Equestrian Athlete for the U.S. Equestrian Federation program for the 2014-15 year.

a second baseman on the Northridge softball team, competed in the 2012 US Pony Finals. She's been competing in the discipline of show jumping, but is breaking in a new horse, Belle, who will compete in the hunter discipline. Harper qualified for the national indoor championships in 2012. She competes in the hunter discipline with her horse, Johnny.

Even though they are not officially teammates, the three feel like they are a team. "At the horse shows we all watch each other compete, and we all cheer each other on," Kirkland said. "We help each other get ready."

Morrison, who grew up in Tuscaloosa, said she would have enjoyed participating in the program, had it been offered when she was a student at American Christian Academy.

"These girls work really hard," Morrison said. "It's great that it recognizes them because they put in just as many hours, if not more, than a person competing in another (school-sponsored) sport would. They practice and do all this in extreme temperatures, heat and cold, because they're working with horses. Horses are animals. They have to be taken care of. That's a huge responsibility in itself, in addition to the athletic aspect. You can't just say, 'I don't feel like taking care of my horse today.' They have to take care of the

equipment and the horse and make sure the horses are fit for the competition."

The girls know of at least one more fellow rider from Westminster who plans on joining them in their 2015-16 high school letter winners' pursuit as well as others who have expressed interest in the middle school program. "It's a big accomplishment for me because most schools don't recognize this as a sport, and it's nice to be recognized. You really feel accomplished when you get that letter," Harper said. Said Kirkland, "It's really special because we had to do this mostly on our own. We didn't have team practices." Said Akins, "We are our own managers" Added Harper, "You earned it yourself because you did it all yourself. It's a lot of hard work, but it pays off. It's an extremely rewarding sport." Said Akins, "If you have the chance to do this, do it. It's a lot of fun."

■ Becky Hopf