

# Calling all Cowboys and Cowgirls

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Another rodeo has begun, and for two days, elementary, junior high, and high school participants will be displaying their Western skills.

From August to October and March to May, students from all over Maryland gather about twice a month for weekend rodeos. The season starts in Garrett County during the county fair, and continues at other state and regional locations. In June and July, junior and senior high school national competitions are held.

Rodeo is very much a family activity. With opportunities for children from kindergarten through high school, all the school age children in the family can compete.

Most people don't associate Maryland with Western riding, but there is strong interest in rodeo in the state. Four years ago, a group met in Crofton to explore the possibility of establishing a Maryland chapter of the National High School Rodeo Association (NHSRA).

Sherri Trenary and one of her clients saw an announcement about this effort and decided to attend. After the meeting, Katie Nechamkin learned that the start-up organization could use someone with her skills, so she offered her expertise. Kurt Walbert heard about it a few months later and joined to help other families whose children wanted to learn and compete in Western riding. All three



**Sam Darby ropes a calf in the Tie-Down Calf Roping event at the Garrett County Fair.**

continue to hold leadership roles today.

Sherri, who grew up in a farm environment, cares for her family, raises horses and cattle (including Corrientes, a hardy Mexican breed used in rodeos), teaches riding, coaches a local college equestrian team, and conducts a therapeutic riding program, but she still finds time to serve the Maryland High School Rodeo Association (MDHSRA), formerly as secretary and now as president. She rode Western herself when she was young, traveling all over the country to compete. She is delighted to be part of bringing Western horsemanship skills to Maryland.

Katie Nechamkin also grew up with horses; her family breeds and races thoroughbreds. She rode English during her childhood, and never experienced Western riding until she was about twenty and working in Wyoming, where she came to love Western culture. She moved back to Maryland and became the manager of a multi-location advanced care veterinary medical practice. Since her initial work with the MDHSRA, Katie has also served as president and is currently treasurer.

Kurt Walbert had horses when he was growing up, but he abandoned this hobby while he was raising a family and working as a crop insurance claims adjuster. However,

when his teenage son wanted to try bull riding, Kurt had to search in other states for ways to train and compete in this Western sport. When Kurt heard about an organization that would provide these opportunities in Maryland, he eagerly signed on to help other parents support their children's dreams. He currently serves as a National Director.

The NHSRA runs programs for junior and senior high students in the United States, five provinces of Canada, and Australia. Local chapters have the option of extending to children in the elementary years, and Maryland has chosen to do this. At both the national and state level, the major focus is on the students.

Young people who want to be part of the NHSRA must be enrolled in school or home school, submit report cards regularly to show that they are succeeding in education while competing in rodeo, and register for each rodeo weekend in advance. If they miss the deadline, they have to sit out the competition and watch others ride. Katie says this usually only happens once!

Students must demonstrate they have worked on skills, and they must have access to horses and practice space. Most families do not have cattle or goats for roping; children practice on dummies or even on siblings. The organization provides workshops and clinics such as beginner bull riding on "hand cranked" mechanical bulls, and through connections with other organizations, students can access several kinds of specialized training such as light rifle and trap shooting. In its first few years, the Maryland chapter has had between thirty and fifty members, with students living around the state.

It is possible to learn skills that will be marketable in future college rodeo teams, professional rodeo, or television and film roles. Rodeo riders will see new places and sometimes meet inspirational people such as Amberley Snyder, a rodeo performer who was paralyzed in a truck accident and continues to compete through adaptive techniques. Sponsors provide prizes and funds for scholarships, and both national and state scholarships can be earned by students, not only for winning events, but for qualities such as leadership,

horsemanship, and sportsmanship. Most of all, though, the kids relish the challenge and camaraderie of rodeo.

Morgan Meekins began English riding at age 5 or 6 before switching to quarter horses. Like many participants, she has been active in other sports; she played softball and was on a travel team before deciding to turn her full attention to rodeo. She joined the MDHSRA as a sixth grader when some friends told her about it.

Morgan has been active in the organization, attending board meetings and serving in officer positions while in the junior high division. She decided to run for president of the high school division because she saw it as a learning experience. Morgan was elected in May 2016 and has enjoyed her year. She is considering running for secretary for this coming year and then perhaps trying for president again in her junior or senior year of high school.

She practices roping with a "sled," a dummy calf pulled by a golf cart; this requires some help from a driver. Morgan



**Jessica McKnew and horse, Smokey, competing in Breakaway, during the Maryland High School Rodeo Association sponsored event at the Garrett County Fair.**

competes in breakaway, an event in which a rider ropes a calf. The time it takes to rope the calf is measured from the instant the rope "breaks away" from the saddle. Her other favorite events include goat tying, where the rider jumps off the horse, flanks a goat, and ties up three of its legs; pole bending, where the rider weaves a round trip pattern around six poles; and barrel racing, where a rider speeds around three barrels.

For Morgan, others in the rodeo community are like a second family. No matter how competitive they are, they



will always help a fellow contestant. She has found that rodeo teaches responsibility, social skills, leadership skills, respect for animals and people, sportsmanship, humility, and the most important lesson of all: Never give up, even when you have a rough season.

Morgan appreciates the opportunities she has had through MDHSRA to travel and to earn scholarships that she hopes to apply to college. She hopes to become a veterinary pharmacist.

Jessica McKnew is another student who joined the MDHSRA in its early days. When Jessica was young, her family bred and showed Clydesdales. She became a top English rider while still young, winning hunter, jumper, dressage, and eventing four years in a row starting at age 9. These wins qualified her for international competition, but she did not meet the minimum age requirement of 17.

A trip to a rodeo at the J Bar W Ranch inspired Jessica and her sister to take up barrel racing, which prompted their mother to research places to learn, practice, and compete in rodeo events. When Jessica's mother discovered the MDHSRA, and saw that it allowed every child in the family to participate, the family signed up for their first rodeo.

Jessica laughs that she and her siblings "stuck out like sore thumbs" when they started. They rode a pony they had used in pony club competition, and they wove poles the way an English rider would. Nevertheless, they were hooked.

Jessica still does barrel racing, as well as sorting, and pole bending, but has come to prefer breakaway, goat tying, and team roping. In team roping, two people, a header and a heeler, rope a steer's head and two hind feet. Jessica first did team roping with her older brother and now partners with her younger sister. Jessica has been very successful, placing as champion or reserve champion in several events, and qualifying for national competition.

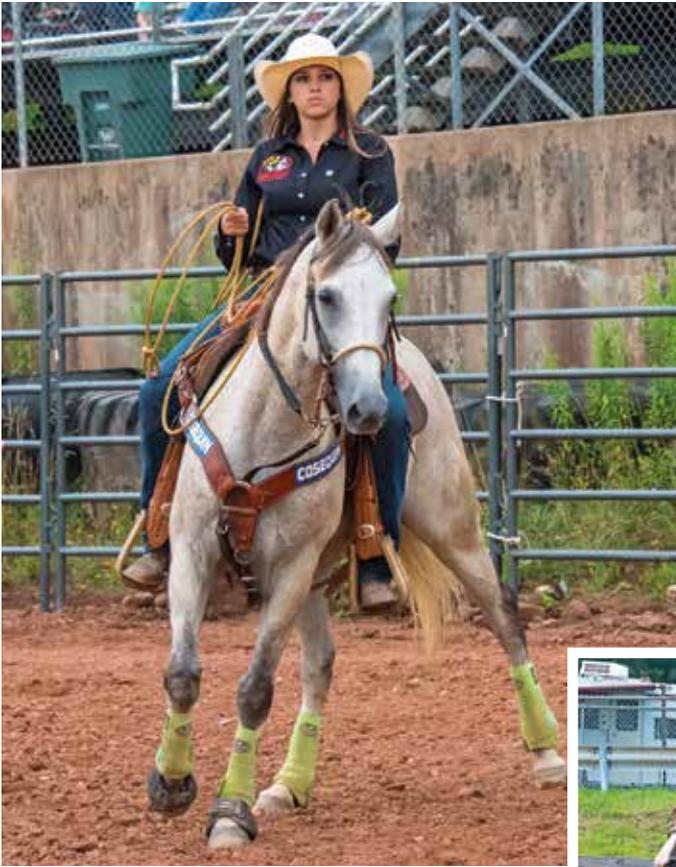
Last year, Jessica served as student secretary of the MDHSRA, and this year she has been queen. She could have kept her secretary position, but decided to pass that role to her sister so that she could really focus on the duties of the queen.

Jessica says that when she was three years old and sat on a horse for the first time, she never imagined being a rodeo queen. Nevertheless, she decided she would like to try for queen after watching the prior queen, Madison Iager. Contestants for queen complete a



**Top photo:** Tanner Naylor competing in the Junior High Boys Tie-Down Calf Roping event.

**Bottom photo:** Brittany Coldiron and her horse, Jet, compete in the pole bending event.



written test on the rules at the state and national level, interview with a panel of judges, speak on a topic they choose (she spoke about bucking broncs and what happens to them after their performing days are over), model Western dress, and perform a horsemanship demonstration that includes skills such as circles, spinning the horse, flying lead changes, and carrying the flag.

All rodeo events have a dress code, but the modeling portion of the queen contest requires a separate special outfit. Jessica and her mother found a dress being sold by a former queen who had had it custom made. Jessica's dress was dyed peach and "beadazzled" with blue and green sequins. Katie Nechamkin jokes that in fancy western attire, "if it sits still, it has a rhinestone on it." Jessica's outfit was completed with a white hat and boots handpainted in peach.

The queen is crowned in May and reigns through the following May. Duties of the queen include choreographing grand entries, making announcements and alerting participants to rule changes, supervising other riders, speaking to elementary students about MDHSRA, and generally spreading the word about rodeo.

After state queens are chosen, they compete at the national level. Jessica also competed in rodeo events and sold lots of fundraiser raffle tickets, so it was a busy but "definitely fun"

experience. According to Jessica, "It's great being queen!" She has enjoyed traveling, meeting people, and gaining in confidence and character.

This is Jessica's last year with MDHSRA as a student, because she is a senior in high school. After graduation, she would like to keep helping out with Maryland rodeo, and to continue competing. She plans to combine full-time work with college, majoring in Chinese Studies and Biomedical Engineering. She hopes one day to work with stem cell research.

High school rodeo preserves Western skills and culture. It promotes wholesome family participation and healthy competition. It emphasizes education and personal growth. Although rodeo is a fiercely competitive sport, its generous and supportive environment wins enthusiastic supporters.

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**Above left: Morgan Meekins preparing for the Breakaway Roping event.**

**Above right: Courtney Casper shows her skills at a Barrel Racing competition.**

**Inset: Darby Conrad heads for the finish during a Pole Bending event.**

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**Jessica McKnew, a senior at Southern High School in Harwood, Maryland, is the current MDHSRA Queen.**

Katie says that “coming from other disciplines, seeing how these kids work together, even though they’re competing against one another, is really a highlight for me.” Kurt feels it is an “awesome program” with wonderful students whom he considers his “adopted kids.” Sherri went to that first meeting purely for informational purposes, but has become “passionate” about high school rodeo. Both Morgan and Jessica describe it as a blessing. All highly recommend rodeo riding as a wholesome family and community activity.

The new season’s first rodeo will be held during the first weekend of the Garrett County Fair (July 29-30, 2017); spectators are welcome. If you or someone you know would like to learn more about student rodeo, you can begin at the national website, <https://www.nhsra.com>, or the Maryland website, <http://www.mdhsra.org>.

[www.schoolhouseearth.com](http://www.schoolhouseearth.com)

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