

Where Can Horseback Riding Take Your Child? Maybe All the Way to College.

*From the team at Star Ridge Stables | Selma, North Carolina |
www.starridgestablesnc.com*

I want to tell you something that I genuinely wish more families knew when their kids first started riding.

Horseback riding isn't just a hobby. It can be a pathway — a real, tangible, life-changing pathway — to college.

Not in a vague, "it'll look good on applications" kind of way. I mean actual college equestrian teams. Actual recruitment conversations with coaches. Actual scholarships that help pay for school. This is happening for student riders across the country, and I believe it can happen for kids right here in our barn.

So with back to school season here, I wanted to sit down and write this out for every family who has ever watched their kid light up around horses and wondered, *"How far could this actually take them?"*

Let's talk about it.

Riding Builds More Than You Think

Here's what I see every single time a young rider walks through our barn doors — and I mean this from the bottom of my heart. By the time these kids are saddling up, grooming, competing, and caring for horses, they are building something that goes way beyond riding skills.

They're learning responsibility. They're learning how to lose gracefully and win humbly. They're learning how to show up — rain or shine, good day or hard day — because the horse needs them. They're learning leadership, even when they don't realize it yet.

And those are exactly the things that college equestrian coaches are looking for.

When a coach is building a team, they're not just looking for the kid with the fanciest ribbons. They're looking for the kid who has grit. The one who can

walk into a competition, draw an unfamiliar horse, and figure it out. The one who lifts their teammates up. The one who cares.

If that sounds like your child — even a little bit — keep reading.

Starting in Middle & High School: This Is Where the IEA Comes In

If your child is in middle school or high school right now, there is a program I really want you to know about. It's called the IEA — the Interscholastic Equestrian Association — and it's honestly one of the best things that's happened to youth equestrian sports in a long time.

Here's what makes it so special: your child does not need to own a horse to compete. Not even close. At every IEA competition, horses are provided by the host barn and assigned through a random draw. Your rider walks in, finds out which horse they got, watches that horse being warmed up by someone else, takes some notes — and then goes in and rides. No familiarizing themselves with the horse beforehand. No personal tack. Just pure horsemanship.

I know that sounds nerve-wracking, but it's actually one of the most exciting and fair formats in youth equestrian sports. Everyone is on equal footing. The rider who wins does so because of genuine skill, feel, and adaptability — and those are the exact qualities college programs are dying to see.

The IEA is open to students in grades 4 through 12, with age-appropriate divisions for middle schoolers and high schoolers, and skill levels ranging from beginner walk-trot all the way to advanced open. There are three disciplines — Hunt Seat, Western, and Dressage — so whatever your child loves, there's a home for them here.

But here's the piece I really want you to hold onto. IEA riders get direct access to college recruitment clinics, workshops, and showcase events. College coaches attend IEA competitions and events. They're watching. They're taking note of riders who compete consistently, who handle the horse draw with composure, who represent their barn and team well.

This is where your child's college riding story can begin — right here, while they're still in middle or high school.

The 2026–2027 IEA Season is open right now. If you've been curious about getting your child involved, this is your sign. Come talk to us at Star Ridge — we would love to walk you through what it looks like. Find us at www.starridgestablesnc.com.

The Varsity Dream: What Is the NCEA?

When most people imagine a college athlete on scholarship, they picture football, basketball, soccer. But the NCEA — National Collegiate Equestrian Association — is exactly that, just with horses.

The NCEA operates under the NCAA, which means it follows the same scholarship rules, eligibility requirements, and recruiting timelines as any other collegiate varsity sport. Right now, 25 colleges and universities sponsor NCAA equestrian programs, with more coming on board each year. Over 1,400 women compete on those rosters across the country.

The competition format is unlike anything else in equestrian sports. Two riders — one from each team — are matched against each other by random draw. They ride the same horse, in the same class, and are judged head-to-head. The rider with the higher score earns a point for her team. It's intense and incredibly exciting to watch, and it demands a level of horsemanship that takes years to build.

On the scholarship side — yes, NCEA schools can offer athletic financial aid. Each school can offer the equivalent of up to 15 full scholarships, though in practice that money is usually spread across multiple athletes as partial awards. A full ride is possible, but partial support toward tuition, room, board, or fees is more common. Every bit helps.

Now, here's something really important for families to hear: NCAA coaches cannot reach out to your child first until June 15th of their sophomore year of high school. But here's the flip side — your child can contact coaches any time. And according to recruiting specialists, riders who wait until junior year to start those conversations are often already behind.

That's not meant to scare you. It's meant to encourage you. Start early. Start now.

The NCEA is the right path for highly competitive riders who are ready for a full varsity commitment and willing to put in the work that comes with it. If that's your child, let's start talking.

The Broader Path: What Is the IHSA?

Not every rider is chasing a varsity scholarship — and honestly, that's perfectly okay. The IHSA — Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association — is the oldest and

largest college riding program in the country, and for a lot of riders, it's the perfect fit.

The IHSA was founded in 1967, and today over 400 colleges and universities have IHSA teams. Nearly 10,000 riders compete each year, at every skill level, from complete beginners to seasoned competitors. It is open to all genders, which is a meaningful distinction from the NCEA.

Just like the IEA your child will have already experienced, IHSA riders compete on horses provided by the host school, assigned by random draw with no warm-up allowed. Here's why that matters for families — your child does not need to bring a horse to college. They don't need to arrange shipping or boarding or any of the enormous costs that come with horse ownership at the college level. The school handles it. That alone makes the IHSA incredibly accessible for a lot of families.

IHSA offers eight competition levels, from Introductory all the way through Open, and riders compete both individually and as a team through Regional, Zone, and National levels. Some schools run IHSA as a full varsity program funded by the athletic department; others run it as a student-led club. Scholarships and financial aid are available through the Intercollegiate Equestrian Foundation and the EQUUS Foundation, though what's available will vary from school to school.

The IHSA is the right path for any rider who loves competing and wants to keep horses in their life through college — without the pressure and commitment level of a varsity program. It's welcoming, it's widespread, and it's worth knowing about.

What Coaches Actually Look For

I get asked this a lot: *"What does my child need to be doing to get noticed?"*

Here's the honest answer. It's not just about the biggest ribbons or the most expensive horse. College coaches — whether NCEA or IHSA — are looking for the whole picture.

They want to see strong riding ability — real horsemanship, not just polish. They want to see a rider who can walk into a situation with an unfamiliar horse and adapt. They want to see solid academics, because NCAA programs require at minimum a 2.3 GPA, and any program worth attending will care about your child's success as a student. They want to see work ethic — the kind that shows up in training reports and show records built consistently over years, not a single impressive season.

They want to see leadership and sportsmanship — how does your child treat their teammates? How do they handle a tough loss or a difficult horse? And they want to see consistency — a rider who shows up and keeps growing, year after year.

That's what we're building here. Every lesson. Every show. Every morning at the barn.

Please Don't Wait Until Senior Year

If there's one thing I could say to every family reading this, it's this: start thinking about this earlier than you think you need to.

I've seen it happen — a talented rider hits senior year, they're finally ready to pursue college riding seriously, and they've run out of time to build the record that programs are looking for. It breaks my heart every time.

The families who have the most options are the ones who started in middle school. Who joined IEA early and built a show history. Who started researching programs freshman or sophomore year. Who reached out to coaches before anyone told them they were supposed to.

Your child's middle school years? That's when the foundation gets laid. High school freshman and sophomore year? That's when they start making contact with programs they're interested in. Junior year? That's when official NCAA recruiting conversations begin.

None of this has to feel overwhelming. It just has to start.

This Is What We Do at Star Ridge

I want to be honest with you about something. When a family brings their child to Star Ridge Stables, we're thinking about more than just teaching them to ride.

We're thinking about who they're becoming.

Our lessons build real, well-rounded horsemanship — not just equitation, but a deep understanding of horses, how they think, how they move, what they need. Our IEA program gives riders real competitive experience in a team environment that mirrors what they'll experience in college. Our showing opportunities build the kind of consistent record that coaches notice. And the

leadership, sportsmanship, and community that exist in our barn every single day — that shapes the whole person.

Lessons, IEA, horsemanship, showing, leadership — all of it together is how we help riders develop into something far beyond a kid who learned to ride.

This is what Star Ridge is about. And we are so proud of every single rider who walks through our doors.

Let's Talk About Your Child's Path

If you're reading this and thinking, *"I want this for my kid — but I don't know where to start"* — that's exactly where I want you to be. Because that's where the conversation begins.

Come talk to us. Tell us about your child — where they are right now, what they love, what they dream about. Let's figure out together what a riding and college pathway could look like for them. Whether they're in 5th grade just finding their footing or in 10th grade ready to turn up the competition level — there is a path, and we'd love to help you find it.

Stop by the barn, reach out to us online, or give us a call. We're here.

 www.starridgestablesnc.com
 **(843) 247-3378**

 **Star Ridge Stables | Selma, North Carolina**

The arena is where they learn to ride. But it's also where their future begins.



Program details, scholarship amounts, and recruiting timelines vary by institution. We always encourage families to contact individual college programs directly for the most current information.