

WHAT ABOUT FIME?

by Rajal Schrubb

Our sport is popularly characterized by our strong attachment to tradition: woolen sport coats-some even with tails, top hats, and just the general idea of using a horse to do, well, anything. However one thing we are notably advanced in is our ability to learn from our competitors. As an internationally recognized sport, in which countries compete heavily between each other, it has never been considered “shady” or “disloyal” or “unpatriotic” to travel to another country to learn how they do horses better than we do; in fact, its encouraged! So if, as equestrians, we regard those who have spent time learning as barn hands or working students so highly, why on Earth am I the first American rider to be accepted into formation at l’Ecole Nationale d’Equitation in fifteen years?

As impressive as it may sound to say “I, Rajal Schrubb, ride at the French National Riding Academy,” how many of today’s highly skilled young athletes would actually know where I was talking about? I cannot say at 18 I had just known about the school, I was only given a flyer and requests to “check it out online” by a very dear colleague. Fast forward past the months of contemplation, application, and eventual acceptance, I found myself in formation at the French Classical Riding School-one of the four classical riding schools in Europe.

The formation I was accepted into was for one year, though other formations can range in duration from six months to three years. However, length of time is the only way these formations differ-aside from skill, though one rests assured that this is

not a place for the amateur “up-down-er.” Each formation is set up essentially the same way, every rider has care for his or her own horse, aside from stalls, and is trained in each of the three Olympic disciplines by a separate coach specializing in a certain discipline. Each student has at least three lessons a day, one for each horse and each discipline. The number of horses per student varies by formation but also by whether or not the rider has the initiative to ask for more ride time.

My formation was the FIME, targeted specifically at international riders. At first I had one horse per discipline, who I rode with the trainer I was assigned for said discipline. Eventually, you talk to enough people and finally find the extra rides to fill in the time between lessons and finally end up riding through your lunch hour to get them all done at a reasonable time that evening- and you love every single stride.

An FAQ often presented to me regards the “language situation.” I spoke very little French when I arrived in Saumur, only the remains of a few years of high school language courses which I never put much effort into... I mean, when was I ever going to even need it? This did pose a problem or two now and again, but the environment at l'ENE is an incredibly safe and accepting place to learn and grow in all aspects in life- it is a school, in the end. Truthfully, the first few months were a little rough- I jumped the wrong fence a time or two, and didn't always quite catch whether or not the round was good or horrifying, but by month four I was far less of a pain to my coaches.

As far as what I learned, the most efficient way to put it as follows: I have got so much more to learn. The quality of education I received in one year, in my opinion, far superior to what I would have gained in a “work experience” environment here

in the states. It is tailored entirely differently than a working student experience found in the states. The programs are devised to produce incredibly well-rounded young equine athletes; if you're not to believe the hunter diva forcably shot out of the start box to go XC, then I don't know who can convince you- its hard at first but you benefit enormously.