

Understanding the IHSA Western Semi-Finals Sponsored by NRHA *An Explanation For Coaches, By Coaches*

Fairfield, CT (January 21, 2015) “As a coach, I explain the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association Western Semi-Finals to new riders or the public as an equestrian ‘March Madness,’” says Amanda Love, coach for West Texas A&M University, winners of the 2013 AQHA/IHSA Western High Point Team National Championship.

The Semi-Finals, coach Love says, are how IHSA narrows a field of roughly 2500 Intercollegiate Western riders down to 150 top qualifiers who then ride and represent their school at the annual IHSA National Championships. “The IHSA Western Semi-Finals were created in 2007 to ensure our very best Western riders were seeded to advance to Nationals.”

The National Reining Horse Association (NRHA) joined in 2007 as official sponsor of three IHSA Western Semi-Finals presented nationally each spring.

The IHSA Western Semi-Finals sponsored by NRHA are a qualifying step to the IHSA National Championships, which celebrate 42 consecutive years of individual and team collegiate equestrian competition this April 30-May 3 at the Eastern States Exposition, West Springfield, MA.

“The Semi-Finals,” coach Love continues, “take location out of the picture for post-season competition. It’s no longer about being the best in your division regionally. It’s about being the best rider in your division, period.”

Prior to 2007, IHSA Western riders underwent a similar post-event qualifying process as their IHSA Hunter Seat counterparts (a Zone Championship), where IHSA Zones riders competed against others from the same territory. Today, IHSA Western riders can benefit from a twofold opportunity of being able to travel across more of the country meeting other Western riders and riding a greater variety of horses, as well as taking pride in being recognized as an NRHA Semi-Finals Champion and truly numbering, coach Love says, among “the best of the best.”

The 2015 IHSA Western Semi-Finals sponsored by NRHA are March 21-22 and hosted by three IHSA member institutions at three separate venues: Florida State University at The Grand Oaks in Lady Lake (judges Stephanie Lynn and Lynn Palm); Ohio State University at Eden Park Equestrian Center in Sunbury (judges Allen Mitchels, Kim Myers); and Redlands Community College at Redlands Royse Ranch in El Reno, Oklahoma, under judges Jeff Hill and Debbie Kail.

“How team and regional assignments to a specific Semi-Final are selected is a question we get asked a lot,” says coach Love.

To clarify the process coach Love, and coach Anne Brzecki (Middle Tennessee State University), author of the regional distribution document for IHSA, share this step-by-step outline for fellow IHSA Western coaches:

1. Semi-Finals host sites are contracted a year in advance. “Hosting Semi-Finals requires the manpower and participation of an entire region, so that region stays at that location if a host college is within the region.”

2. The second placement of a region, to a specific Semi-Final, occurs if a region is going to help a neighboring region host the competition. Typically this means bringing horses. That neighboring region, whether within the same Zone or not, is then assigned to a specific Semi-Finals location if they can help bring the appropriate horses (Each Semi-Final needs a minimum of 35 well-trained, quality Western Horsemanship and Reining horses.)
3. The third step in assigning a region to a specific Semi-Finals is determined by their placement in the prior year's AQHA/IHSA Western High Point Team National Championship placing. "To ensure that no one Semi-Final is 'stacked' with last year's champion teams," coach Love says, "the top nine regions from the previous year's Nationals are evenly distributed throughout the three locations."
4. The fourth step distributes regions who did not have a team placing in the top nine at the prior Nationals. IHSA Zone Chairs consider several factors when making assignment suggestions for the regions remaining to be placed in a Semi-Finals. These can include distance travelled to Semis last year, expense to travel, having previously hosted a Semi, and whether some regions prefer to travel farther from home.
5. The last factor is to attempt to assign regions who have Alumni Western entries to one of two Semis that host Alumni classes. Because of the smaller number of Alumni riders, only two Semi-Finals host Alumni competition. Not all Alumni ride from their undergraduate home region, ride with an IHSA coach or are connected to a team (though many are). IHSA must distribute undergraduate regions equitably before allocating Alumni to the two Semi-Finals that will hold their classes. Alumni from regions that are distributed to the Semi-Final that does not host Alumni classes are sent to one of the two that will.

"By this system," says coach Brzezicki, "regions from each Zone will compete at each Semi-Final, making them truly national in scope. Yet no one Semi-Final should be overwhelmed with the winners from last year's Nationals.

"No region knows in advance the other competing schools at any Semi-Finals location."

What is known is that IHSA Western Semi-Finals sponsored by NRHA provide an exceptional opportunity for riders at every level of skill to compete for a chance to qualify in pursuit of a national title. The NRHA agrees.

"Some say it's the slide, others promise it's the precision and detail that bring the most excitement to the sport of reining. To us at NRHA, we get most excited watching our talented young reiners move on to college, become excellent riders at the IHSA collegiate level and return to NRHA as mentors and strong contributors to the sport of Reining.

"Not only does IHSA combine academics with an equestrian experience, it gives NRHA the satisfaction knowing our sport has made a positive impact on so many young lives. We are proud to continue our IHSA relationship," says Hayley Lewallen, NRHA Senior Coordinator of Marketing.

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