

MARY PARDEE MAKES THE CASE FOR EQUINE STUDIES *p. 50*

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BRITTANY FRASER- BEAULIEU & ALL IN

Dressage At Devon
Winners *p. 28*

Inside:

Boyd Is Back For Stable View *p. 54*

Packy McGaughan: Glimpses Of Eventing's Future *p. 58*

Work The Walk With Olivia Lagoy-Weltz *p. 80*

Eli Worth-Jones Balances Intercollegiate Riding With Saving Lives

Emory & Henry's "Superman" serves his community both in and out of the tack.

BY KIERAN PAULSEN



"We call him Superman," said coach Lisa Moosmueller-Terry of Eli Worth-Jones (center), who, in addition to working as an EMT, volunteer firefighter and leader in search and rescue, also rides on Emory & Henry's intercollegiate teams and was the Intercollegiate Dressage Association national champion at lower training level in 2016. He's pictured here with Moosmueller-Terry (left) and IHSA coach Heather Richardson. HANNAH PHILLIPS PHOTO

The blue and yellow banners of Emory & Henry College hung in a straight line over matching tack trunks. Students flitted between the stalls, ensuring the horses were settled for the night at the 2017 Intercollegiate Horse Shows Association National Championship in Lexington, Ky. Eli Worth-Jones scrubbed water buckets, picked hooves and wrapped legs in the growing quiet. The 20-year-old towers over most of his teammates, but his height is far from the most remarkable thing about him.

Worth-Jones' family lives in a two-

story log cabin on a 50-acre farm 17 miles north of Abingdon, Va. Over the past 15 years they've transformed an overgrown plot of land into a family farm, creating pastures, a barn and a run-in shed for their menagerie of animals. Worth-Jones comes home for the summer but spends his school year at Emory & Henry in nearby Emory, Va., where he is pursuing a degree in biology and riding on the Intercollegiate Dressage Association and IHSA teams.

"We call him Superman," said IDA coach Lisa Moosmueller-Terry, "because he does so much. He's so involved. I

don't know how he manages."

The moniker suits Eli. In addition to his equestrian endeavors, he's also a certified emergency medical technician, volunteer firefighter, field leader for state search and rescue, rope rescue technician, and an Eagle Scout.

The Worth-Jones family—Becky and Roscoe Worth-Jones and their children, Larry, Katie, Abby and Eli, moved to Virginia from Flat Rock, N.C., in 2002 after they started to feel confined by Flat Rock's growing population. The isolation of the Virginia countryside drew Becky and Roscoe, who promised their children horses in exchange for leaving North Carolina.

"My mom was actually terrified of horses," Eli said, "but she was also supportive, and it just kind of happened. Our first horse's name was Tito, and he was in bad shape when we got him, really just a bag of bones with rain rot."

Eli and Abby, who is three years older, took their first lessons with local trainer Sue Croghan. Eli was too young for formal lessons when Abby started, so he tagged along for pony rides until his eighth birthday. A neighbor gave Eli a bay pony mare named Callie, and the two ran the gamut of equestrian disciplines, competing in everything from hunters to barrel racing. Eli even earned a spot in an exclusive riding club.

"It was called The Dusty Bottoms Club," joked Becky. "You know how you play 'Horse' in basketball, and you get a letter every time you miss? Well you got a letter for falling off. He earned all his letters."

"I definitely learned to ride the hard way," Eli agreed, laughing.

And it wasn't just the horses that taught Eli valuable lessons during his



“I definitely learned to ride the hard way.”

—ELI WORTH-JONES

childhood. Becky has her masters in social work, and she and her husband wanted to open their home to children in need. They had adopted Katie and Larry through the foster system in 1992, though Larry died in a swimming accident in 2005. As a family, they decided to take on a six-year commitment to fostering. During those years eight boys came and went from the household.

“You never know what’s going to happen,” Eli said. “Some situations have been planned out, and sometimes it’s like the snap of finger. ‘Hey, we need to place this kid, and your home fits, so come pick him up tomorrow.’ Sometimes you know ahead of time

when they’re leaving, and sometimes a judge can make that decision, and the next day they’re gone. Sometimes they stay for a year, maybe more, and some are only here for a week.”

The foster boys contributed to the farm chores and took lessons with the local 4-H chapter, taking advantage of the therapeutic properties of horses and hard work. Some might call it chaos, but Eli found the experience rewarding.

“My older brother meant a lot to me as a kid growing up,” he said. “So it was an honor to be able to be a big brother for these kids who didn’t get to have that experience with someone else.”

The Worth-Joneses believed in

Eli Worth-Jones’ first pony was a bay mare named Callie, and they competed in everything from hunters to barrel racing.

DEANA FLEENOR PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

teaching more with life lessons than classroom hypotheticals, so they homeschooled Eli and his siblings to give them the opportunity to pursue their interests and develop real-world skills. When he wasn’t riding, Eli began working his way through the Boy Scouts of America ranks, which sowed the seeds of his commitment to community service and the outdoors.

Eli got his start in search and rescue with his mother’s urging. They joined the team together and completed the basic training. He found his passion in rope rescue, which is a technical specialization using ropes to reach people stuck in difficult places. He joined the rope rescue team and also became a certified EMT and volunteer firefighter at Washington



The woods have felt like home to Eli Worth-Jones since he was a little boy, and the family he's cultivated through search and rescue, fire and EMT mean as much to him as his blood relations. PHOTO COURTESY OF ELI WORTH-JONES

County Fire and Rescue. He spends scheduled shifts at the fire station and responds to calls that come “in the dead of night and never in good conditions.”

His first call involved looking for a single-engine plane that had crashed on state game lands. The team searched all night without luck, returning briefly to rest before setting out again the next day. A state police helicopter helped them locate the plane, and Eli went up with the officers to guide the rescue team to the crash site. On other occasions, Eli responded to a house explosion that miraculously left all three occupants alive and an accident where the driver of a truck was ejected from his vehicle seconds before it collided with a train. He sustained only a fractured hip and a concussion.

“It’s pretty wild what some people live through,” Eli said. “You end up looking at them like, ‘You really shouldn’t be here talking to me right now.’ It makes you stop and think about what you have. It usually makes me check up on my family because a lot

of bad things happen to good people.”

Despite the danger, Eli loves being part of the first responder teams. The woods have felt like home since he was little, and the found-family he’s cultivated around search and rescue, fire and EMT mean as much to him as his blood relations.

“I don’t worry too much when he’s with them,” Becky said. “I couldn’t ask for a better group of people to take Eli under their wing. They know they have to answer to Momma Becky. One time Eli went for cave training. I remember the guys saying, ‘Careful, we don’t want to have to call Becky on this; make sure you get Eli out of there.’”

“I really enjoy health and being part of my community,” Eli said. “Sometimes we get a 6 a.m. fire call, and it’s hectic and crazy, and you’re exhausted by 10 a.m., and then you shower and go to class. Or sometimes it’s 3 a.m., and some kid is trying to die in the back of your ambulance. But it’s good. It’s really rewarding.”

Fitting In Formal Education

During his last year of high school Eli dual enrolled at nearby Virginia Intermont College in Bristol. It was his first choice university, and by dual enrolling, he was able to take riding classes. He built connections at the college and started to formally develop the horse skills he’d picked up as a child. He also worked hard to get into VI’s honors program to ease the burden of tuition, but his plans changed when VI closed in 2014. Eli resigned himself to two years of community college while he figured out the next step.

“I had never really considered going to Emory & Henry,” Eli said. “But at the last minute they announced they were buying VI’s equestrian program, so I applied. I came back from work one day, and my parents handed me my letter. I was thrilled.”

Eli jumped right into the riding program, earning a spot on the IHSA and IDA teams, though his interest in dressage had only recently been sparked. Eli took his first dressage class the last semester of high school after IHSA coach Heather Richardson suggested it to improve his riding.

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Dressage had a steep learning curve, illustrated by the first time he tried to execute a 20-meter circle in preparation for his first competition.

"I rode a 20-meter circle, and it was just the worst 20-meter circle anyone's ever ridden, so we decided to wait," Eli said.

Moosmueller-Terry echoed this story, laughing as she said, "I probably embarrass Eli so much every time I tell it, but it really shows how far he's come. He's gone from that terrible circle to placing top 10 in national competitions, and he's on track to show first level."

While Eli had a rough start on the dressage team, by the end of his freshman year, he was representing his team at the national championships, placing fourth for the team at introductory level and helping them earn the national championship. They followed that up in 2016 with another national title, and that year Eli was the individual lower training level national champion. In 2017 he finished sixth individually at upper training level.

"It was pretty wild; it wasn't something that I really expected," Eli said about his first championships in 2015. "I had terrible nerves. I always get nervous going into the end of the ring. I literally have to stop the horse after they blow the whistle, drop the reins, take three deep breaths, and then pick up my reins and go in the ring."

Learning the intricacies of IHSA competition wasn't easy either. A lifetime of riding had granted Eli sensitive hands and excellent feel, but learning the position and strategy necessary for IHSA competitions was like learning a new language.

"The first time I rode in a lesson with Heather I was still a kid coming straight out of riding barrels where there was basically no control," Eli said. "She sent me out on left lead canter, and she said, her quote was, 'Oh my God Eli, stop.' After that she would come in early to give me private or semi-private lessons until I caught up."

The extra lessons paid off. Eli pointed out of the walk-trot-canter division this past year and went to the IHSA National Championship as both a team and an individual rider. Richardson promised a very different experience



Rope rescue is one of Eli Worth-Jones' many skills, and he's passionate about this search and rescue technical specialization that uses ropes to reach people stuck in difficult places. PHOTO COURTESY OF BECKY WORTH-JONES

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Eli Worth-Jones transformed from a beginner dressage rider when he began college at Emory & Henry to an individual national champion in 2016. PHOTO COURTESY OF BECKY WORTH-JONES

from the smaller IDA Nationals, and the hallowed grounds of the Alltech Arena did not disappoint. With 425 riders from 110 colleges vying for national titles at the Kentucky Horse Park, Eli found himself amongst stiff competition. He earned eighth in individual walk-trot-canter equitation on the flat and 10th in the team novice class.

"I kind of tried to delete those rides out of my mind. I wasn't happy with how I rode," Eli admitted. "I think I had two canter strides when they asked for trot in novice. It sucked, but it happened."

But the disappointment faded as he focused on his team and their goals for next year.

"I did place top 10, so I can't be too mad about that," Eli said. "We have to learn from everything and take the best from it. Moving forward, I just want to do what I can to help out the team and hopefully we make it [to Nationals] a second time."

A silver lining came in the form of having Becky in the stands. After

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missing his IDA win in 2016, she made the trip to Kentucky to watch Eli ride.

"I sat home and cried when he won the IDA championship," Becky said. "My son was the national champion, and I wasn't there. I did go to IHSA nationals though, and I was so proud. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. You see how people connect with each other because they all love the horses."

The sense of community is similar to what Eli found with his search and rescue team, and although braving the wilderness to save someone's life and riding a dressage test seem worlds apart, he said there are parallels.

"Family dynamic of the team is pretty comparable to what it is with fire and search and rescue," Eli said. "And Lisa [Moosmueller-Terry] was a rock climber; she's actually used some rock climbing techniques to help teach me riding. Riding and my other activities all require hard work, commitment and an ability to work towards goals to get better. Riding is a really good way to center your mind around something, and being in the woods or working with ropes does that too."

Eli credited his family, instructors and friends for their part in his achievements. "I have loads of respect for my parents, who pushed me and kept me out of trouble," he said, "and for Lisa and Heather at the barn, who are not afraid to put you in your place, but they do so to build you into a better person and a better rider."

When he declared his major, Eli selected a biology track because he wanted to be a veterinarian or a physician's assistant. But his experiences with search and rescue have drawn him toward a different path. As he ponders life after college, training horses, going into Air Force pararescue and aiding at disaster relief sites are all occupations that interest him.

"I have a lot of doors open, but choosing which one to go through is a different challenge," Eli said. "I've got some things set in stone. I want to do something that keeps me on my toes and keeps me excited, whether that's riding an awesome horse or doing fire and EMS. I want to continue to serve my family, my community, my country and the world." 🐾



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