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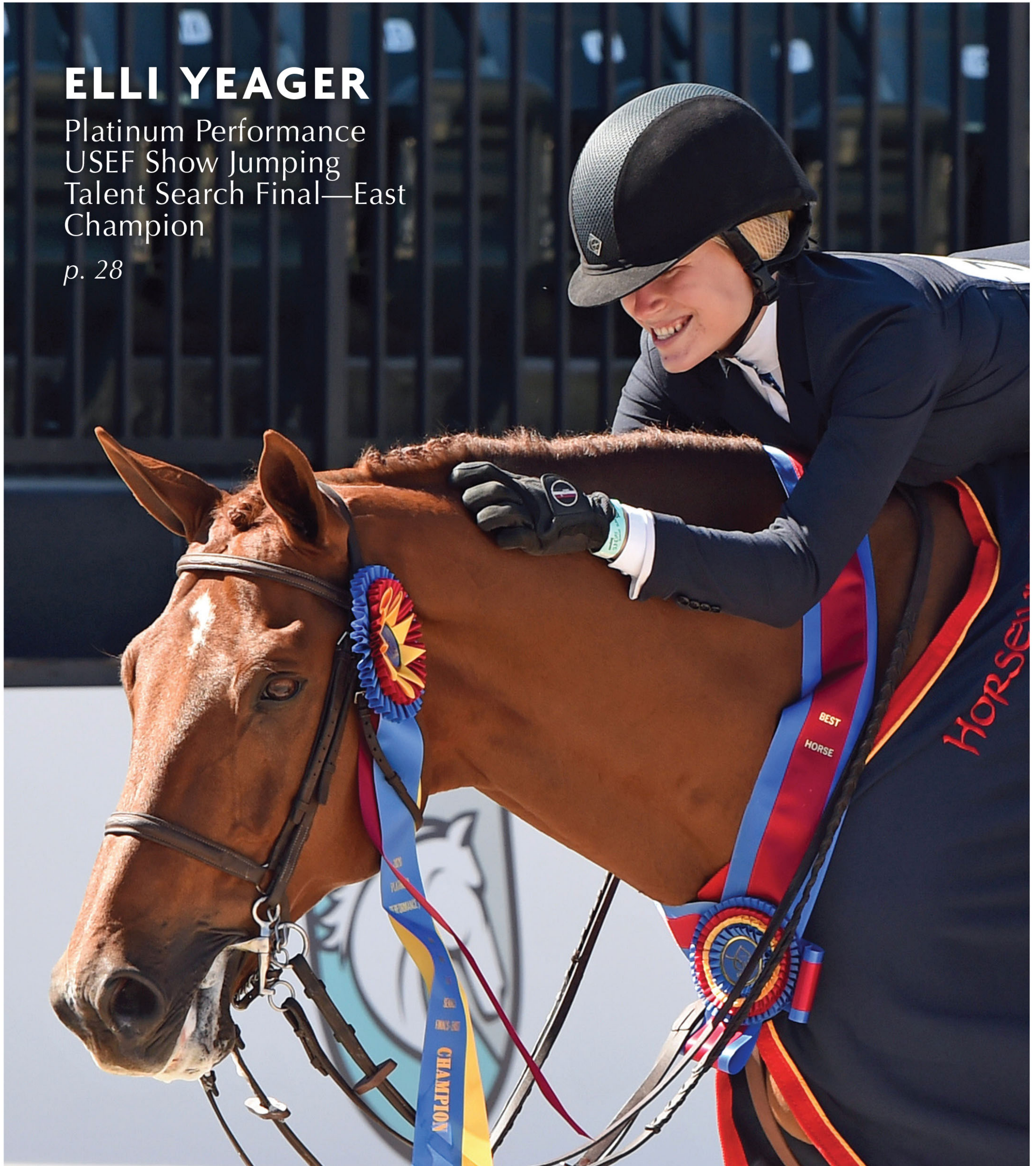
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Platinum Performance
USEF Show Jumping
Talent Search Final—East
Champion

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Yeager Steals The Show At Platinum Performance USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Final—East

From riding make-believe steeds to competing in a national equitation final, this 18-year-old has always found happiness in horses.

Story And Photos By **Kimberly Loushin**

After Elli Yeager finished her round with Copperfield 39 in the work-off for the Platinum Performance USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Final—East, she caught a glimpse of her father, Lou Yeager, walking away from the ring.

He wasn't leaving out of disappointment—it was a beautiful ride—he just needed to work out his nerves.

"He just kept walking; I saw him leave, and I was like, 'Oh, there he goes to pace,'" Elli said. "He will walk for hours. I honestly don't get nervous before I go in the ring, but I think he gets *real* nervous."

While the tread of his shoes might be a little worn from all those steps, Lou made it back ringside for the presentation, anxiously awaiting the results. Soon it was just Elli and barnmate Ava Stearns left, and when Stearns' name was announced as the reserve champion, there was no one more excited than Lou about Elli's victory.

"He is definitely one of my best friends for sure," said Elli. "I know some people aren't close with their parents, but I've always been my father's daughter. My parents got divorced when I was really little, and there was a long custody case and all that, and I got to pick which parent I wanted to live with, and I chose him. He fought for me like it was life or death. He's just amazing; I can't say enough good things about him."

"I think he's just as competitive as me in a sense," she added. "He wants it just as badly as I want it. It's nice to

have a parent that understands and is very interested in what I'm doing. Some parents don't come to the shows or aren't as interested, but he uprooted his whole life in California to come with me and do this full time. I have endless amazement for him that he could do that."

Lou, who grew up on a cattle farm and participated in 4-H, fostered Elli's interest in horses from a young age. As a toddler Elli found creative ways to practice riding, borrowing from her father's closet for her "tack." With belts fashioned into makeshift stirrup leathers and ties serving as reins, she rode the couch arms for hours, engrossed in episodes of "The Saddle Club." She and her dad then created a bridle for a wooden saddle rack, and Elli sat astride its saddle blanket before she graduated to actual lessons.

"He connected me with horses," Elli said of Lou. "He used to take me on these trail rides. I think I was like 2 years old, and he would walk the horses for hours. We'd go out two hours at a time and switch horses and go out again."

Her parents divorced around the time she started riding, and the barn helped bring her comfort when life became stressful.

"Horses for sure were always a safe place for me," she said. "I would spend most of my time there, but if I was ever having a rough day or anything, my dad would come, and we'd go right to the barn, and we'd sit there for hours. You know how some people talk to therapists? I would talk to my horses."

PLATINUM PERFORMANCE USEF SHOW JUMPING TALENT SEARCH FINAL—EAST Tryon, N.C.—Oct. 16-18

RIDER	HOMETOWN
1. Elli Yeager	Wellington, Fla.
2. Ava Stearns	Chilmark, Mass.
3. Zayna Rizvi	Wellington, Fla.
4. Taylor Griffiths-Madden	Wellington, Fla.
5. Dominic Gibbs	Colorado Springs, Colo.
6. Sophee Steckbeck	Clarksburg, N.J.
7. Jennifer Staniloff	Setauket, N.Y.
8. Mimi Gochman	Wellington, Fla.
9. Amira Kettaneh	Hollis, N.H.
10. Caroline Blake	Westport, Conn.

➤63 riders competed.



Elli Yeager rode her partner of eight years, Copperfield 39, to the win in the Platinum Performance USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Final—East.

Elli started riding “Copper” when she was 10, and they purchased him on the final day of her parents’ custody battle. In their eight years together, the 14-year-old Holsteiner (Crawford—Pedeka) became Elli’s rock.

“I feel like he’s my life partner,” she said. “I’m almost at a loss for words. He’s the absolute best horse and best friend. I swear he speaks English. And he knows if I’m happy or if I’m sad, because if I’m sad he’ll kind of nudge me, and I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh, fine.’ He kind of interrupts it. You know how they have the therapy dogs that nudge you? I feel like he does the same thing, except he hasn’t gone through any training.”

A THIRST TO PROVE HERSELF

Elli is no stranger to a win at the highest level in equitation. In 2018, she topped the Lindsay Maxwell Charitable Fund Washington International Horse Show Equitation Final (District of Columbia), but even then, she admitted it didn’t seem real.

“I got back to the barn, and I was sitting with Ally Bradley, who works for [Missy Clark and John Brennan’s] North Run, and I was like, ‘Wait, did that really just happen? Did I really just do that?’” Elli said. “I went and saw Copper this morning, and my dad came, and we just sat there and fed him carrots. It’s a surreal experience for sure, but it’s amazing.”

Elli, who grew up in Westlake Village, California, started her equitation career under the tutelage of Karen Healey.

She didn’t receive a warm welcome when she came east in 2015 to compete for the first time in the Dover Saddlery/USEF Hunter Seat Medal Final (Pennsylvania).

“When I first started doing indoors, everybody was always like, ‘Oh you’re from California; you can’t win an equitation final because you’re not with these people all year,’” she said. “I just remember everybody *always* saying that, and it was such a downer, and I was like, ‘Well why am I doing this?’”

Elli, 18, did eventually start riding with Stacia Madden and Beacon Hill on Healey’s suggestion, and she and her dad now reside in Wellington, Florida, year-round in order to advance her riding.

A good showing at the equitation finals was an important goal for Elli, but she also wants to jump international-level courses, which is why she joined the team at North Run during Week 7 of the Winter Equestrian Festival (Florida).

“North Run has a ton of experience with the jumpers,” said Elli. “I was really looking to excel in the jumpers, and I was watching everyone really run with it over there, and I was like well that’s exactly what I want to be doing. So I went there and I sat down with Missy, and I said, ‘I want to be consistent in the jumpers like all of your kids are.’”

Jumpers may be the end goal, but Clark’s program has a strong emphasis on equitation, and they chipped away at Elli and Copper’s weakness: the flat phase.



Ava Stearns piloted Acer K to the reserve title in the Platinum Performance USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Final—East for the second year in a row.

“I do a lot of flatwork myself personally in the tack, so I really kind of honed in on that,” said Clark. “She knows that horse so well that the jumping part was always going to be the easier part, and it is with her on that horse.”

“She typically would have a little difficulty putting that horse in front of her leg and in a frame, so we initially worked on that,” said Clark. “I thought she was really good with her extensions, but with the lateral work it was still a little stiff, so that was a bit reflective in her score for the flat, but I’ve done this long enough [to know] that you don’t have to be on top in the flat phase. You can be somewhere in range, and you know that you have the ability to keep moving up, which is what she did.”

The East Coast edition of the Talent Search Final typically takes place at the U.S. Equestrian Team Headquarters in Gladstone, New Jersey, in early October, but COVID-19 moved it to the Tryon International Equestrian Center in Mill Spring, North Carolina, Oct. 16-18. Following the flat phase, where judges Archie Cox and Lauren Hough

THE SHOW MUST GO ON

With COVID-19 putting a damper on the show season for several months, the U.S. Equestrian Federation Talent Search Task Force changed the qualifying criteria for finals this year. For the West Coast edition, held Sept. 18-20 in San Juan Capistrano, California (see Oct. 5 & 12, p. 70), you could participate in the finals as long as you completed one qualifying class. On the East Coast, the points required dropped from 90 to 40, and a ribbon from a two- or three-star qualifier was no longer required. Despite these changes, only four riders failed to complete all three rounds.

“[In California,] we ended up with 28, which is the biggest group of riders in probably the last 10 years, if not longer, so we were very happy that they got into it,” said DiAnn Langer, the U.S. show jumping young rider chef d’equipe. “They said we really like this, so they’ll be back. And the same here, we modified it a little bit. We have a very big group; we were able to take all of them, and I think it was excellent the way it came off.”

The East Coast final, which took place this year at the Tryon International Equestrian Center (North Carolina), had 63 starters, six more than last year. They stuck to the same COVID-19 protocols already in place for the USEF-rated show there, and for the final four work-off, where riders are required to swap mounts, the grooms wiped down equipment between trips.

“I’m so pleased that we were able to have it here and that everybody got to participate in this final,” said Langer. “The Talent Search is a very special competition. Those riders that have won it, most of them have that desire to go forward and do a bigger presence in this sport, and it really opens a lot of doors for these riders. Also, it’s an educational process for the younger riders. I couldn’t be happier. The courses were fantastic; the judging was fantastic; the cooperation from everyone was fantastic. We couldn’t have asked for a better result during a very difficult time.”

tested the riders on their lateral work, extensions, counter-canter and flying changes, Elli sat 11th.

She moved up in the gymnastics and jumping phases to sit second and qualify for the final-four work-off alongside Stearns, Zayna Rizvi and Taylor Griffiths-Madden. The riders started on a clean slate and took a turn on each other's horses over an eight-jump course. That's where Elli set herself apart.

"Every single horse she got on, you could tell that she appreciated them, and she sort of rode them the way they wanted to be ridden, and they all jumped beautifully," said Hough.

Cox agreed, saying they were looking for "strong, confident, forward-thinking riders that could think for themselves. We asked different questions, a forward ride, a conservative ride, and the top four riders did it beautifully." 🐾

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