



# FIELDING Your Own TEAM

## How Trainers are Starting Their Own Riding Teams to Build Business

By Megan Arszman

**In** a world where parents are looking for sports to enroll their children in so they can keep them busy every weekend, thousands of dollars can be invested in uniforms, equipment, lessons, and tournament fees. When most internet posts compare the annual cost of travel or recreational teams against each other, the one sport that's often missing is equestrian.

Encouraging new participants to try riding or showing horses has been a constant struggle for equine breed and equestrian discipline organizations. The main concerns include overall cost and availability of training along with the most important teammate—the horse. But there's a better way to introduce horses to youth without the big investment of purchasing one and finding a place to keep it.

Enter the Interscholastic Equestrian Association (IEA).

It follows in the footsteps of the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association (IHSA), a group that has been around since 1967 with the intent of providing “equestrian competition for all college and university students regardless of riding level, gender, race, sexual orientation, or financial status.” The IHSA offers classes for beginners through advanced riders in both Hunter and Western disciplines (now including ranch classes), while eliminating the

expenses of horse ownership. The IEA was founded in 2002 with just 200 participants, pushing the mission of promoting lifelong involvement in equestrian athletics. The most recent membership numbers for the 2024-2025 season topped 14,940 participants.

The IEA has two different age groups for teams:

- Middle School: Grades 4-8
- Upper School: Grades 9-12

In 2022, the IEA started an adult pilot program for amateur riders ages 21 and over to have a place to compete.

Groups such as the IEA and YEDA (Youth Equestrian Development Association) might offer a team in your area, and it's an economic way for parents to get involved in horse shows without having to pay for tack or care of the animal. Joining an IEA team offers many benefits, says IEA coach and AQHA Professional Horsewoman, Rebecca Halvorson. “The benefits of riding so many horses and being on a team are huge when you're trying to get involved in this industry,” she says. “Then, there are more than 400 IHSA schools and 24 NCEA teams. There are so many places for these kids to go and move on that are a good fit for them.”

Stephanie McConnell, AQHA and APHA judge and coach of the Wilmington College Equestrian Teams for IHSA and IEA, loves

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the opportunities the two organizations provide for young riders. “It gives them the opportunity to ride better quality horses and receive better quality instruction than they would if they were just trying to find somewhere to learn how to ride a horse,” she says.

“I just think the opportunities are there, we just have to do a better job as ambassadors in order to bring people into our world,” Halvorson continues. “We don’t provide a good enough on-ramp. We make it look so expensive when it truly can be affordable.”

Halvorson, whose team won the 2025 Middle School Championship and High School Reserve Championship, has seen first-hand how a sport such as travel baseball handles marketing and provides universal reach to youth compared to equestrian competition.

“My son plays professional baseball, and we did every travel baseball program. We traveled across the country, and spent summers in Atlanta just for our son to play baseball,” she says. “That was just as expensive as our daughter going to all the horse shows while trying to make the equestrian team at Oklahoma State. People will pay, but there are so many kids that want horses but they go on to other things because there aren’t enough on-ramps provided by our industry professionals.”

“The best thing about IEA is that it gives parents and the riders a taste of what it’s like to show and to work with horses,” says McConnell.

### Starting Your Team

If you’re thinking of starting your own team, you must have a minimum of three riders in one age group (Middle School or

#### FAST FACTS: SO YOU WANT TO COACH IEA?

**Is there a minimum age?** Yes, you must be at least 21 years old

**Are there certain requirements?** Yes, you must hold a general or professional liability insurance policy (which can be purchased through the IEA for \$150 per year, or you can have your own to cover up to \$1,000,000) and complete the SafeSport education course (and provide the certificate of completion with the membership application), and the NFHS concussion course. Coaches must pass the IEA Rulebook Quiz, which is done online.

**Is there a location requirement?** No. If there is a need for a team in your area, you’re invited to start your own team! There may be some regions with multiple teams, but there is no limit to how many teams can be in one region.

**Do you have to be affiliated with a school?** No. While having the support of a school can be nice, IEA teams do not have to be affiliated with a school.

**Is there a minimum number for a team?** Each coach must have three riders in an age group to start a team (middle school or upper school).

**Must you have a host barn?** Every team should have a facility to practice with access to enough horses to support the team.

For more information: [RideIEA.org](https://www.RideIEA.org)

Upper School). Coaches are required to have liability insurance, which can be purchased through the IEA or on their own, and also



**Rebecca Halvorson gives last-minute instructions to one of her riders at the 2025 IEA National Finals.**

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show proof of completing the Safe-Sport educational course, and the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) concussion course. Finally, every coach must pass the IEA Rulebook Quiz that’s online.

A team is official when there is a minimum of three competitors in the same age group (Middle or Upper), and one coach. The maximum number of team members is 40 riders. Riders of all experience levels are encouraged to participate—from Beginner Walk-Trot to Varsity Open. Even riders who show in AQHA, APHA,

POA, etc., are invited to show in their appropriate levels of IEA.

Teams compete in either Western, Hunt Seat, or Dressage. Some teams offer one discipline, two, or all three.

Teams are then registered in the IEA database, which allows interested riders to search for your team if you’re located in their area. Once that is complete, coaches are able to really get to work building their IEA team. The Member Marketing Coordinator for the IEA, Jennifer Eaton, says this is the right time to start some

networking with other coaches and groups within IEA.

“(Coaches) will want to reach out to their local Zone Administrator to discuss their Region placement and learn any nuances about competing in their area,” suggests Eaton.

“When (Wilmington) decided to have an IEA team, the first thing we did was post on Facebook that we were going to have an open house for the surrounding community and invite families to come, see the barn, learn about IEA and the program, and ask questions,” says McConnell. “We wanted to gauge the interest in having a



**Stephanie McConnell, coach of the Wilmington Junior Quakers IEA team**

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team. We had 15 people show up and 10 pretty much signed up that night.”

### Perks to Being a Coach

Opening up an IEA team in your barn can offer another source of income, aside from training horses. Coaches recommend that potential coaches take some time and investigate the lessons material out there to learn how to teach beginner riders (i.e., the basics such as, “this is how you tighten a cinch,” and “this is how you need to sit the trot”). The hardest part will be acquiring lesson horses that can be used by riders of all skill levels. But Halvorson says that with some luck and a lot of networking, it doesn’t have to be too difficult to find horses.

And, if you’ve been trying to find an affordable insurance liability policy for your barn, it’s helpful to be part of a program such as IEA. The association provides an insurance policy that’s a blanket policy for their program—including every team that wants to be a part of the policy. Because the IEA has such a large network, you can get a good rate and have the necessary coverage provided through them.

Coaches for IEA teams can design the program with their own vision. For example, because Halvorson spends a lot of time on the road judging and with her clients outside of IEA, she’s made her program very flexible. “I tell parents upfront exactly what I expect in terms of time commitment,” she says. “Communication is just key. I tell them what everything costs, how much lessons are, how much it’ll cost to go to a show with me.”

### Balancing with Show Life

If one obstacle to starting your own team is the concern about a schedule, the IEA would be a good fit, both

### INTERESTED?

AQHA Professional Horsewomen Rebecca Halvorson and Stephanie McConnell are so passionate about helping young riders, they are offering to assist anyone interested in starting their own IEA team.

“There’s a lot of ways I can help somebody, and help them model what they do to start their own team,” says Halvorson.

- **Rebecca Halvorson:** halvorsonranch@gmail.com
- **Stephanie McConnell:** stephanie\_mcconnell@wilmington.edu
- **Jennifer Eaton (IEA):** jenn@rideiea.org



**Halvorson Ranch won the 2025 National Championship for the Middle School division.**

Halvorson and McConnell say.

“The beauty of IEA is that there is a cap of six shows per rider, and we generally do two shows in a day,” explains Halvorson. “That is important because I don’t have many more free weekends than that. We go to about three or four two-day shows each year. Our region has up to six or seven shows this year, so you can go to more if you want, but each rider can only show in a maximum of six shows each year. And, if you don’t get qualified, it’s just not your year.”

Your team is exactly that—your team. You set the fees for the team, lessons, and travel costs. You get to set the schedule. When you work with other coaches throughout the year to plan shows, it gets easier if there are more options for your team to attend. This leaves you the ability to squeeze in an IEA show between breed show circuits, thus giving your current clients and your

team the chance to show where they want.

### 2025-2026 IEA FEES

Teams may enroll at any time through the year, however after October 1, all enrolling teams will need permission from the IEA Zone Administrator to ensure that there will be competitions remaining for your team to attend.

- Upper and Middle teams of the same discipline - \$250 (+ \$25 late fee after October 1<sup>st</sup>)
- Upper or Middle School team - \$175 (+ \$25 late fee after October 1<sup>st</sup>)
- Coach - \$60
- Rider - \$70 (+ \$10 late fee after October 1<sup>st</sup>)
- Adult Contributing Member - \$60
- Adult Rider - \$60
- Junior Contributing Member - \$35

Visit the website at [www.rideiea.org](http://www.rideiea.org).

### Final Thoughts

“I think if someone is going to start an IEA team, go into it with your eyes wide open,” says McConnell. “Make sure you have different levels of horses—safe, dependable horses—for your different level of riders, safe tack that fits your horses and riders, and be sure you have the right insurance to cover you.”

“Make sure you’re starting an IEA team for the right reasons: to support your passion of sharing the horse with a new audience,” says Halvorson. “Anything I can do to pay it forward and leave the equine industry better than I found; and it is that I want the message to say how incredible it is that we have the horse. They’re just special creatures,” she says.