

Walker Keeps Working For The Washington Win

He chalks up another major equitation final victory on his journey to becoming a professional horseman.

By **Kieran Paulsen, Lindsay Berreth** And **Kimberly Loushin**

Sam Walker got his start in the jumper ring when he was 8, learning to be bold and ride forward aboard steadfast ponies. The thrill of the jumper ring never left him, but as he got older and began talking about a future in the horse industry, his parents, Dee and Scott Walker, made a suggestion.

“When I told my parents that I really wanted to take this sport seriously, they said, ‘OK, then you need to do the equitation,’” said Sam, 17, Nobleton, Ontario. “They said it would do wonders for my riding, and once I got into it I really started enjoying it.”

Last year Sam topped the ASPCA Maclay Final at the National Horse Show in Lexington, Kentucky, in his second season competing in the finals. This year, he added to his equitation championship count by winning the Lindsay Maxwell Charitable Fund WIHS Equitation Final at the Washington International Horse Show, Oct. 22-27 in downtown Washington, District of Columbia.

“I just kept it simple and tried to stick to the plan,” Sam said. “I was really happy with how today went. I set this goal right after [Washington] ended last year—I was 10th, and third the year before, so I was hungry to get back in the ring.”

Sam and Missy Clark’s 12-year-old warmblood gelding Waldo led the final from start to finish, scoring above 90 in every phase.

Judge Sue Ashe commented, “Sam I remember when you started

with the gray horse—it was a little rough, to be honest. You’ve got such a feel for a horse. You bring out the best in them.”

Sam and Waldo partnered up in early 2017, three years after Sam started as a working student at Clark and John Brennan’s North Run Farm in Warren, Vermont, and Wellington, Florida.

“I remember the first time I rode Waldo very well,” Sam said. “I was in Florida, at Missy’s farm. I’d gotten the list sent to me the previous night and knew I was riding a horse named Waldo, but I didn’t know who Waldo was or what Waldo did. The first few lessons weren’t super pretty, but over the next few months we figured him out, and he really just fell into the perfect position.”

Waldo hadn’t done much equitation before Sam started riding him, so they learned the ropes together.

“From the time I started in January to that first class in October, he came full circle,” Sam said. “He was just on it, and ever since then it’s like he just knows his job, and he knows when it’s go time. He tries his heart out. At the start I was a little wary, but when I walked in the ring my very first time on that horse it was like somebody switched the lights on. I’ll never forget that first class. All the training, all the hemming and hawing was worth it.”

Sam travels between the U.S and Canada throughout the year with his family’s Forest Hill Farm, but

LINDSAY MAXWELL CHARITABLE FUND WIHS EQUITATION FINAL Washington, D.C.—Oct. 26

RIDER	HOMETOWN
1. Sam Walker	Nobleton, Ont., Canada
2. Ava Stearns	Chilmark, Mass.
3. Dominic Gibbs	Colorado Springs, Colo.
4. Grace Debney	Hampden, Mass.
5. Mimi Gochman	Palm Beach, Fla.
6. Emma Fletcher	Buzzards Bay, Mass.
7. Tanner Korotkin	Wellington, Fla.
8. Alexandra Piolet	Highland Park, Ill.
9. Zayna Rizvi	Greenwich, Conn.
10. Augusta Iwasaki	Calabasas, Calif.
▶38 riders competed.	

The third time was the winning one for Sam Walker and Waldo in the Lindsay Maxwell Charitable Fund WIHS Equitation Final at the Washington International Horse Show. *LINDSAY BERRETH PHOTO*



the end of finals season offers a bit of a break.

“We take a couple of weeks as a family to just hit the reset button and start again in January,” he said. “When I’m at home—which is rarely—I do a lot of dirt biking. We have a motocross track at the farm, and on Mondays in Florida I like to go fishing with my friends. There has to be that balance, even though the horses are the priority.”

Sam is also learning to find balance as a rider as he starts to envision his life as a professional.

“Some of my favorite riders in the world are Marcus Ehning and Darragh Kenny; they’re a real treat to watch,” Sam said. “Hopefully someday I can ride half as good as those guys. I’ve been lucky enough to meet with a few big international riders, and whether it’s a short conversation or a long one it’s been really nice to hear the advice. The biggest thing I’ve learned is from Ian Millar, and also my dad, and it’s that someone’s always watching.

Even if you had a tough round you have to keep a smile on your face and remember that your horse tried for you and you tried. Maybe it just wasn’t your day; try to be the best loser you can.”

Although his parents are trainers, Sam said they’ve never pressured him to follow in their footsteps. As his accomplishments have started to stack up, he’s focused on staying grounded.

“Once you get your head in the clouds it can be tough to come back,” he said. “I’ve just been taking it step by step, but I have not forgotten where I came from. I try to just keep my head down, keep my nose to the grindstone and keep working to better myself as a horseman. I love the sport for the horses—not the ribbons, not the prize money—and that will never change. At this point it’s just getting more and more fun every year, with every new horse and with every bigger class I get to jump.”



A CLEAN SWEEP FOR NEW HOPE

David Belford and Chris Payne spent their time at the Washington International running from one awards ceremony to another when students Agatha Lignelli, her sister Alexa Lignelli and Samantha Takacs took the small, medium and large pony hunter championships, respectively.

"We couldn't have asked for better," said Belford. He and Payne have been working together for 18 years, and they founded New Hope LLC roughly 12 years ago. They split their time between Cincinnati and Palm Beach, Florida, with 45 to 50 horses, 12 of which are ponies.

"In this industry, everyone has their own strengths," Belford said. "Chris is an amazing rider and super charismatic, and I'm super invested in the horse care and clients and all that stuff, so we complement each other on a lot of levels. I'm very excited about anything special, whether it's a pony, a horse or a kid. If they're truly invested and have the right energy then I'm all in. The ponies make me smile more



Left Top: Samantha Takacs and Brighton closed out the Washington International Horse Show by claiming the large pony and grand pony hunter championships. SHAWN MCMILLEN PHOTOGRAPHY PHOTO

Left Bottom: In her first trip to the Washington International Horse Show, Stella Propp took home the small junior hunter, 15 and under, championship with Inquisitive. SHAWN MCMILLEN PHOTOGRAPHY

than you could imagine. I admire them and the kids so much; there's nothing more rewarding than watching a great pony try its hardest for a kid that really wants it."

Takacs, 14, started training with New Hope nine years ago. She rode Ellie Sadrian's 10-year-old German Riding Pony gelding, Brighton, to the large pony and grand pony hunter championships despite having limited time to practice on him since she got the ride in May and went away to the Berkshire School (Massachusetts) this fall.

"It's my first year, so I don't get to ride that much during the week," she said. "[Brighton] loves big venues like this; they're his favorite, but I get a little nervous. There was a little extra pressure [because of Alexa and Agatha winning], and [Brighton] was grand last year too. I just tried my best and tried to be consistent. I'm so grateful to have [Belford and Payne] as my trainers."

"[Samantha] really is like our child," Belford said. "She's one of those people that you've not only watched learn to ride, but watched grow up. I'm so proud when things do go her way because I feel like she's done her due diligence; she's incorporated the idea of what it is to love

her pony and work hard at it."

Before Takacs won, Alexa earned the medium pony hunter championship aboard the 10-year-old warmblood gelding EMC Entourage (Jet Blue—Pendley Miss Perfection).

"He was a breeding stallion before we got him, so we brought him from the bottom to the top, and it's been a really fun journey," said Alexa, 12. "He's just so bold. This horse show is so hard, and we're all so proud of him."

Belford agreed that the gelding's transformation has been impressive.

"Entourage is such a talent. He rides like a horse, so he needed some polishing, but now that light bulb has been turned on," Belford said. "Alexa is such a talented rider, and she's going to have so much success going forward."

Agatha, 9, New York City, set the bar for Alexa when she and Rollingwoods Knee Deep (JD Cops And Robbers—Rollingwoods Lorna Doone) won their first Washington outing. "Henry," a 17-year-old Welsh Pony gelding, is a seasoned veteran who also brought Alexa through the small pony division.

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• As **Caroline Nadalin** headed in for the jump-off in the \$10,000 WIHS Children's Jumper Championship with **Boujis** she knew she had to focus on one thing: trusting her horse.

"He's so experienced, so when he gets in the ring he just knows what to do, and you just have to point him to a jump," she said. "He's got it under control. He's just been the best to work with, and every time I've gone in the ring it's just gone better and better."

The 14-year-old from Plain City, Ohio, has been aiming for Washington all year, so taking home the win was particularly exciting.

"I love him so much," Nadalin said of the 18-year-old Irish Sport Horse by Cumano. "He is so trustworthy, and he just does whatever you ask of him time and time again. He's amazing, so I trust him with my whole heart."

• It was a bittersweet finish to the weekend for **Augusta Iwasaki**, who claimed the grand junior hunter championship with **Small Affair** and earned the large junior, 15 and under, championship with the gelding and reserve with Eliza Kimball's Seaside.

"They were both perfect all week," Iwasaki said. "I've been showing Small Affair for four years, and he's been a part of the family for 12. It's just so nice to get to show him because he's getting older. I think this is going to be his last indoor, so it's the best way to end. I couldn't ask for a better week."

Augusta Iwasaki claimed the large junior, 15 and under, and grand junior hunter championships with Small Affair at the Washington International Horse Show. *LINDSAY BERRETH PHOTO*



Owned by Lyn Pedersen, the 16-year-old Selle Français gelding (Elf D'Or—Eva De Fontenay) has been a prolific winner in multiple divisions.

"It's like nothing else I've ever experienced," said Iwasaki, 15, Calabasas, California. "I don't even remember a time when I didn't know him, because when we got him I was like 4. I've watched him be so successful with so many people, and it's like no other feeling to get to have such a special horse."

• **Hallie Moss**, 11, topped the WIHS Pony Equitation Final aboard **Birtley's Crowned Jewel** (Eyarth Tayma—Birtley Daydream) in what she called a "magical" final show on the 12-year-old Welsh Pony gelding. Moss trains with Three Ships LLC, which is run by her mother, Kristin Moss, and Abby Blankenship in Westfield, Indiana. Three Ships had two additional riders in the top four: Addison Stoughton was second, and Taylor Landstrom was fourth.

"Everyone comes to indoors hoping to do well," Blankenship said. "For me as a trainer I'm like, 'Wow, maybe I should go buy a lottery ticket!' [The kids are] a great team; they always help each other and love each other. [Hallie is] a hard worker. She is one that is not afraid to try new things. She's essentially a working student, so she's been put on a lot of different animals, and we try to get her thinking about what her horse is doing in that moment and what she can do to adapt."

Maggie Hill enjoyed a stellar Washington, winning the small junior hunter, 16-17, championship with O'Ryan (pictured) and the large junior hunter, 16-17, division with Cassanto. *LINDSAY BERRETH PHOTO*



“[Agatha] could not be more appropriately mounted on Henry,” said Belford. “He would go to the ends of the earth for her, and every time you watch her show it’s like the light gets brighter and brighter.” 🐾

WASHINGTON INTERNATIONAL PONY EQUITATION FINAL
Washington, D.C.—Oct. 27

RIDER	HOMETOWN
1. Hallie Moss	Fishers, Ind.
2. Addison Stoughton	Westfield, Ind.
3. Kat Fuqua	Atlanta, Ga.
4. Taylor Landstrom	Excelsior, Minn.
5. Alexa Lignelli	New York, N.Y.
6. Maddie Tosh	Milton, Ga.
7. Ashleigh Colantuoni	Raleigh, N.C.
8. Hannah Famulak	New York, N.Y.
9. Emilia Richard	Middlefield, Conn.
10. Josephine Rose	Springboro, Ohio

➤25 riders competed.

WASHINGTON INTERNATIONAL JUNIOR
Washington, DC—Oct. 22-27

SMALL PONY HUNTER CH: Rollingwoods Knee Deep, The Lignelli Family.
RES: Dressed To Go, Vivian Golden.
MEDIUM PONY HUNTER CH: EMC Entourage, The Lignelli Family.
RES: Blue Chip, Heritage Farm Inc.
LARGE PONY HUNTER CH: Brighton, Ellie Sadrian.
RES: Storyteller, Temple Equestrian LLC.
SMALL JR. HUNTER, 15 & UNDER CH: Inquisitive, Aquitaine Equine.
RES: Bond, Shadowfax Equestrian LLC.
SMALL JR. HUNTER, 16-17 CH: O’Ryan, Maggie Hill.
RES: Luscious, Sloan Lindemann-Barnett.
LARGE JR. HUNTER, 15 & UNDER CH: Small Affair, Lyn Pedersen.
RES: Seaside, Eliza Kimball.
LARGE JR. HUNTER, 16-17 CH: Cassanto, Maggie Hill.
RES: Cartello Z, Caroline Lloyd.
\$10,000 WIHS CHILDREN’S HUNTER CH: Q-Bella, Kelsey Campbell.
RES: Nuff Said, Briar Field Farm LLC.
LOW JR./AMATEUR-OWNER JUMPER CH: Tenacious D, Kennedy McCaulley.
RES: Darc Kiss Z, Temple Equestrian LLC.
HIGH JR./AMATEUR-OWNER JUMPER CH: Climbus, Barbara Smith.
RES: Helene VE, Co-Piolet LLC.
\$10,000 WIHS CHILDREN’S JUMPER CH: Boujjs, Caroline Nadalin.
RES: Camera Ready, Fit To Print Farm.
WIHS REGIONAL HUNTER FINALS CH: Lapis, Olivia Brown.
RES: Aladdin, Gabriella Conte.
WIHS REGIONAL HUNTER FINALS, PONY CH: Autumn Frost, McKenna Gregorio.
RES: Dreamscape, Mosie LLC.
GRAND PONY HUNTER CH: Brighton, Ellie Sadrian.
HIGH-SCORE JR. HUNTER OWNER-RIDER: Maggie Hill
HIGH-SCORE JR. RIDER, PONY TIE: Alexa Lignelli & Agatha Lignelli.
GRAND JR. HUNTER CH: Small Affair, Lyn Pedersen.
SHALANNO STYLE OF RIDING AWARD: Grace Debney.
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BEST CHILD RIDER, PONY: Samantha Takacs.
BEST CHILD RIDER, HORSE: Maggie Hill.

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