

# Insights from Capital Challenge Champions

*Competitors at the 2023 Capital Challenge Horse Show share their favorite training tips and exercises for success.*

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The Capital Challenge is one of the most prestigious and competitive events of the fall show season. Each October, top talent from across the country flocks to The Show Place Arena at Prince George's Equestrian Center in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, for hunter and equitation championships. Throughout the year, riders work toward a successful Indoors season,

each with their own tips and exercises that help them excel. Here, five competitors from the 2023 Capital Challenge provide insight into their preparation and routines.

## **John French—Cavalletti for the Win**

French and Babylon, an 8-year-old Oldenburg gelding owned by Ariana Marnell, were winners of the \$25,000 World Champion Hunter Rider (WCHR) Professional Challenge at this year's competition. French and Babylon are longtime partners, French having brought him along since he was 4 years old. French attributes Babylon's success to his belief in keeping his horses happy. "It's important to take them out a lot and not just ride them in the ring all the time. Twice a week they go out

▶ John French and Babylon have won the \$25,000 WCHR Professional Challenge for three consecutive years.



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in the field or out on the trail. You have to make them love their job and want to do it for you.”

In addition to keeping Babylon happy, French keeps him sharp with cavalletti work. One of his favorite exercises is a one-stride with a pole in the middle. “[It] gets them to drop their heads down and slow down and curl over each jump.”

A variation of that exercise is a bending one-stride to one-stride combination. French sets the cavalletti in a corner of the arena at 21 feet apart. The curving aspect of the exercise asks the horse to bend and land on the correct lead. “But,” French reminded, “they have to keep the shape and not land on the lead by falling in.”

### **Nick Haness—Happy Horse, Happy Life**

Haness, who placed second in the two-round WCHR Professional Challenge aboard Queen Celeste, also stressed the importance of keeping his horses happy. “I think having a happy horse before the horse show and during the horse show equals success, in my opinion. And just understanding their language.”

Before the class, the 12-year-old Holsteiner mare owned by Glade Run Farm LLC, was feeling fresh. “I just talked to her for a few minutes and made sure we were on the same wavelength,” said Haness. “She settled down nicely. She believes in me and I believe in her. I think that’s my success with my horses. I honestly believe that’s a big part of it.”

### **Kate Conover—Win Over Their Hearts**

Conover excelled through a Playoff Round in the \$20,000 WCHR Pro Final in which she rode R & R Hunter Horses LLC’s Small Friendship to victory. In the Final Four, riders showcased their skills by showing four horses provided by the competition over four different courses.



◀ Nick Haness and Queen Celeste placed second to French and Babylon in the WCHR Professional Challenge.



▶ Kate Conover and Small Friendship won the WCHR Pro Finals Playoff Round. Then Conover went on to win the overall WCHR Pro Final.



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▶ Halie Robinson and Leisure captured the WCHR Developing Pro Challenge.

Conover stayed on top for the overall title.

Growing up, Conover said she never had a consistent mount and rode many horses, which gave her an edge in the class. “Riding a lot of different horses my whole life, I think, really set me up well for this class here.”

She said that each horse has a different way of going. “Some are strong, some take a lot of leg, some have a lot of blood, some go left, some go right. It’s just in that moment thinking, ‘OK, how can we solve this puzzle and become a team fast?’”

Conover said her trick is winning over the heart of her mount. “I think you can have a relationship fast. They have to trust you. ... In this class, I tried to win their hearts pretty fast.”

### Halie Robinson’s Circle of Death

Robinson was crowned champion of the WCHR Developing Pro Challenge aboard

Leisure, an 8-year-old Hanoverian mare owned by Stable Assets LLC. Robinson has an equitation background and believes that hunters should be just as rideable as equitation horses. “All of the skill sets that the equitation horses have really helped make the hunters more supple and stronger and more balanced.”

To hone rideability, Robinson focuses on effective flatwork and pole exercises. Her favorite—the circle of death. Robinson sets three ground poles on a circle and spirals in and out at the canter, changing the number of strides between the poles. The number of strides increase as she spirals out and decrease as she spirals in. “You have to have a horse that’s able to get around both of the inside legs and accept both of the outside reins really nicely.”

Robinson practices adjustability with a straight line of poles as well. “I like to do a lot of leaving strides out and adding

strides,” she shared. “I think it tests their gears a lot. ... On the straight line, you have to make sure that they’re elastic enough in their backs to be able to extend their stride and then collect their stride without losing any of the power.”

### Tessa Downey—Know Yourself and Your Horse

Leading equitation rider Downey rode Efendi, a 15-year-old Holsteiner gelding owned by Ashland Farms, to capture the North American Junior Equitation Championship.

To prepare for the finals, Downey said she practiced exercises based on the previous year’s courses. In doing so, Downey was able to pinpoint her strengths and weaknesses. “Something that’s always been difficult for me is pace, as well as really keeping the pressure around an animal over, let’s say, an oxer.” Recognizing



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▲ Tessa Downey and Efendi earned the North American Junior Equitation Championship.

that weakness, Downey made corrections on course that propelled her to the win. “I was able to pick my horse off his front end as well as use my leg to really take his hind legs.”

But in addition, she said it’s the rider’s responsibility to know his or her horse. “[Efendi’s] preparation isn’t drilling. You won’t ever see people doing shoulder-ins at 5 in the morning on him, because it’s your responsibility as a rider to know him well enough to know that he has your back.” **PH**