

Ashleigh Conroy-Zugel and Ungaro trot down the centerline at the 2014 U.S. Dressage Festival of Champions in Gladstone, N.J.



Making The Grade: Ashleigh Conroy-Zugel Excels In School & Down The Centerline

Story and Photos by Sue Weakley

Sixteen-year-old Ashleigh Conroy-Zugel is an A student who is also an ambitious dressage rider. She qualified for the 2013 AGCO/USEF Junior Dressage National Championships, yet dreams of attending college and has her heart set on a small, intimate atmosphere for continuing her studies.

The Ranney School in Tinton Falls, N.J., works with her so she can compete in Wellington during the winter show season and still get the outstanding education she needs to prepare her for what's ahead.

The Ranney School works in close collaboration with #1 Education Place in Wellington, and the two institutions designed a custom-fit college preparatory curriculum for her. Ashleigh has been in the program for the past two years, but other Ranney School stu-

dents have paved the way for her.

"We provide an individualized situation for every student," said Anita Kane, director of the high school program at #1 Education Place. "We have worked with her school for many years, and they are extremely cooperative. A school where we interface like that, and the student is getting the same work as her peers, is really the most ideal for the student. She can then exit and enter seamlessly from the two different learning environments."

While in Wellington, Ashleigh arrives at #1 Education Place at 8:30 a.m. and sets to work on assignments her Ranney teachers have e-mailed her. She often works independently but consults the local teachers if she needs help. She e-mails or scans her assignments to her teachers and makes use of Skype technology for presentations to her teachers back in New Jersey. Her mother picks her up around 2 p.m. for a quick bite to eat before she rides.

"When I've had projects that are dif-

ficult to do, my school is flexible, and I can Skype my teachers when they have a free period," Ashleigh said. "They really use technology to help make everything easier. They still give me the same projects, but they slightly alter them so it will work from a distance. It's really cool."

Continuing in the program is not a given, and Ashleigh is required to meet with the Ranney headmaster for permission to continue. She is tested before she leaves for Wellington, while she is in Florida and again on her return to be sure she is progressing at the school's rigorous pace.

"They check to see how she deals with her independence," her mother, Sonia Zugel, said. "They monitor her grades and see if she has kept up with her schoolwork and is making progress. I think it's great she has the opportunity to be very competitive in the equestrian world as well as in her education. Ranney is a top school with a demanding curriculum, and it's great that she can keep up with that."

Last year, Ashleigh took Algebra II, Spanish III, Honors Chemistry, Honors Western History II, and Honors English 10 and aced every one of them. She'll be a junior in the fall and will tackle a rigorous schedule, including a number of Advanced Placement courses.

"She is able to travel on the same continuum as her peers up north as far as being assessed and doing the work delivered by our staff instead of their staff," Kane said.

Ashleigh's family owns Ramanessin Farms in both Wellington and Holmdel, N.J. She, her mother and Lucia, her 9-year-old sister, will depart for Wellington after midterm exams in January, and Ashleigh will be back in classes in New Jersey after her classmates have

their spring break in April. She has attended the Ranney School since third grade.

While in Wellington, Ashleigh connects with her non-equestrian New Jersey friends via text, phone, Facebook and Skype, and she has fun at shows with her Wellington friends.

"It's cool having friends from all different areas," she said. "It's great seeing people in Florida, and we stay busy with a lot of horsey activities: dressage on Friday nights, jumping on Saturday nights and polo on Sunday."

The Ranney School works closely with Ashleigh, and encourages her by allowing her to use riding as her required physical education credit.

"At the Ranney School, our mission-promise is to know and value each child, and to tailor a program for success that helps each child discover and achieve his or her full potential," said Paul Zarnowski, headmaster of the upper school at Ranney. "Many of our students have highly developed gifts and talents in an amazing array of activities — they are nationally and internationally ranked equestrians, fencers, soccer players, rowers, ice hockey players, or they are ballet dancers, singers and more. We are proud of the way we create 'best of both worlds' programs that enable our students to pursue extraordinary opportunities of a lifetime without sacrificing academic excellence."

Not only does Ashleigh excel in academics and dressage, but she is also active in her community and in school activities. She attended an international leadership conference in Europe during the summer, organized a school fundraiser for the Nature Conservancy and helped start an equestrian team at Ranney.

"When I came back from Wellington this year, my homeroom all got me a

card saying welcome back and gave me a little party," Ashleigh said. "They really care. It was so special. I thought if I was gone half the year, people would just forget, but they really try to include everyone."

Her mother could not be more pleased with the way the #1 Education Place and the Ranney School work together for Ashleigh. She has nothing but praise for her daughter's school.

"I think Ranney does a great job of allowing kids to be competitive in education and the equestrian world and extracurricular activities, which is very important," Zugel said. "The nice thing about the school is that they never say no. They allow the young adults to flourish and to grow and give them every opportunity to excel. It's a great school and a really close community." □



(Right) Not only does Ashleigh Conroy-Zugel ace her tests at school, she aced her dressage test at the 2014 U.S. Dressage Festival of Champions.