

By Martha Veon



In February 2013, the call went out to all PFHA youth riders to try out for the 2014 Team USA. Ninety-Three youth answered that call. These riders were part of the largest and most diverse group of youth to try out for the PFHA Mundial team since the first one in 1996. After a year-long tryout process of camps, clinics, and classes, 43 youth riders from across the country were selected to represent the United States and the PFHA in the 10th Youth Mundial in Pereira, Colombia.

Over the course of the following six months, 14 members withdrew from the team. They had worked hard to earn their position, but life sometimes changes our plans for us. That was the case with these 14 highly valued members. Due to unforeseen circumstances, it was not meant to be their time. They would have to wait until 2015 to tryout again for the 2016 Youth Mundial. That left only 29 members from the original team roster of 43.

The Youth Mundial is a team competition. The ages range from 4 to 24, divided into categories by age. Every team is allowed up to 6 riders in each category. Each competitor has a chance to earn points for their country. The larger the team, the more opportunity to earn points. To lose these 14 valued members was a major blow.

For the 29 members remaining, the weight on their shoulders became heavier, but their determination became stronger. They stayed the course, and never wavered from their quest to bring home the Gold.

Before they left for Colombia, this team of 29 riders packed their clothes, saddles, boots, hats, and a large dose of good old fashioned "American grit." They were headed for the world stage, and the world would be watching.

The youth Mundial is a World Class equestrian competition. It stands shoulder to shoulder with any top-tier international competition in equestrian sports. To be chosen to compete for your country on the World Cup team elevates the rider to a new level. They have earned the status of world class athlete. Anything after that is icing on the cake. Riders competing at the World Cup level are the best of the best. The reality of this became clearer to the team when calls from the press started to roll in. With that reality came a lot of excitement and a lot more pressure.

Several coaches arrived in Colombia a few days early to choose horses from the horse pool and match them to the riders. The horses in the pool are an unknown entity, making this a challenging task that requires years of

experience. Each team gets two practice sessions to see if their horse selections are acceptable. If not they have a brief time to return the horses in question to the pool and choose again. "Unacceptable" is a horse that is not manageable and could prove a safety issue. If a horse is safe, but not a good match for the rider it was chosen for, you may return it if there are more horses remaining to select from. Our coaches did an excellent job with the selection process.

In this competition, the judging focuses solely on the skill of the rider, but the quality of the horse and level of training it has received could either aid or hinder the rider in the ring. Bottom line, the horse pool adds an element to the competition that raises the bar significantly for the riders that use it.

At the Youth Mundial, the riders compete in only one discipline: Equitation, the oldest and most fundamental classical equestrian skill. Equitation is the foundation for any riding skills equestrians strive to master. Simply put, it is when the balance of the rider and the balance of the horse are in perfect harmony. When this is achieved, the horse and rider move as one. This perfect balance between horse and rider allows the horse to move as fluidly as it would without a rider on its back. To observe equitation at its best is like viewing fine art in motion, that is why the sport of equitation is often called "the Art of Equitation"

Like the Olympics, the Youth Mundial is kicked off with a festive opening ceremony complete with lively entertainment to welcome each team to the host country. After a warm greeting from the announcer, the parade of teams from Panama, Curacao, Aruba, Dominica, Venezuela, Colombia, Puerto Rico, the USA, and Germany filled the arena, waving their flags as their dignity, honor, and pride shown through. It was contagious! Parents and fans were on their feet cheering while the sound of applause, cow bells, and air horns filled the arena. "Welcome to Pereira, Colombia! Welcome to the 10 Mundial De Jinetes Y Amazonas Felix Santiago Oliver! "

After the festivities of the opening ceremonies, all of the

teams were invited to enjoy the universal language of music and dance. Even the youngest riders joined in the fun. This warm welcome from our host country was well received. It was the first gift of treasured memories that each team would carry home.

The next morning the bus ride to the arena was quiet while riders and coaches were mentally preparing for the competition. The first two classes for team USA were the 6-8 year-old girls and the 9-11 year-old girls. Although these three young riders did not place, their demeanor set the tone for the team. They entered the arena exuding confidence, pride, dignity, and determination. Their teammates followed their example. Each time they entered the arena, Team USA established themselves as serious contenders and the competition was fierce!

Next up came the 12-14 year-old boys. It was the largest class, with 28 riders. The level of skill was so closely matched that the tension filled the arena from the very beginning of the class. The class lasted for three hours, and the crowd was on the edge of their seats from beginning to end.



In equitation, one wrong degree of placement for a foot, leg, hand, or elbow can cost the rider dearly. Just one mistake on the figure 8, backing or serpentine work known as "the pattern" will cost the rider the competition. They are judged

65% for their horse handling and 35% for body position. To place is extremely difficult. No matter how good you are.

Finally after many work offs between different groups of riders, much debating back and forth between the judges, we had a decision. The crowd erupted filling the arena with cheers, the championship, and Gold medal went to Jorge Suarez, Jr. of team USA, 3rd to Yean Luis Torres Aleman riding for the USA, 4th to Diego Carlos Figueroa riding for the USA. Three placements in one class for Team USA. Champion, third, and fourth! These three young men had made a strong statement that said loud and clear, "Here comes the United States!"

Next up were the 12-14 year-old girls, and again the



contenders.

In the girls 18-21 team, USA had 4 riders. They all came in very strong, yet for two with many wins in their careers, slight errors added up, and it was not their day. The other two heard their names called, they had made the cut. Kaycee Gracia and Alison Crooks found themselves in the final work off for champion, 1st, and 2nd.

The excitement built as they had to perform one test after another of varying degrees of difficulty. Then finally Kaycee's name was called. She had received the Silver/1st place medal and Alison the Bronze/2nd place. This moved us into a tie for 3rd place with Aruba going into the final class.

The final class was the 21-24 year-old girls. The USA had a full field of 6 riders. All champions in their own right, but at the World Cup that was then, and this is now. Only the present counts. So like everyone else they were ready to ride and make it count. From the start of the class two of our most skilled riders had horses that refused the course or were non-responsive in some way. This was it for them. In a heartbeat, the chances of a placement were gone. Then slowly over the course of the class, a mistake here and there cost two more of the team a placement position. Two of our riders were left and finally we heard their names, Michelle Gomez and Monica Figueroa had made the cut. They were called to a work off. It was tense, finally the decision was made, Aruba's rider won the Gold/championship, Michelle Gomez placed 4th for the United States, Monica Figueroa placed 5th for the United States. Giving the United States and overall finish of 4th place. Finishing ahead of 5 out of 9 teams. This is

competition was close. The Judges had their work cut out for them. This was also a very large class. Right in the middle of the rail work the lights in the arena went out! This was potentially a very dangerous situation, but as the lights were quickly restored, everyone could see these young riders had managed the situation safely keeping their horses calm, then promptly reengaging them as the class continued. Finally the judges made their decision and team USA had won another placement. Coral Rodriguez placed 1st finalist/3rd place.

In the 15-17 year-old boys class, several riders experienced uncooperative mounts, for team USA's rider, his horse came up short with a sore back leg during the course of the class. Our coaches used a challenge rule to try and have the horse replaced to spare the horse and give the rider a fair shot. It was not meant to be, as the officials refused the challenge. This was a case where the condition of the horse was costly for the rider, but his excellent horsemanship shown through.

Then came the 15-17 year-old girls. Again the class was big and loaded with talent. Team USA had a full field of 6 riders in that class. Between them they have many championships. Yet, except for two, it was not their day. This is the World Cup and the slightest mistakes can cost everything. Then the judges called two names from Team USA for the final cut. Julia Suarez and Alex Amador. Julia was in a work off for first and Alex for a finalist position. Then we heard, Julia Suarez riding for the USA is Champion/Gold, Alex Amador 5th place. Outstanding! Team USA was holding its own!

In the 18-21 year-old boys class Jaime Suarez kept it going, winning the Bronze/2nd place, moving Team USA up the ladder. That American grit was paying off! Team USA was not just there for the experience, they were claiming the status of serious



the highest points standing the United States has ever earned. With a team of 29 the odds were not in our favor for such high finish, but a strong team ethic, talent and grit persevered.

When competing at the international level, the athletes on the team have a second duty of equal importance to initial goal of winning. They must represent their country as good will ambassadors. How did team USA measure up in this category?

Dr. Jose Laracuente, a U.S. Delegate for Confepaso who was instrumental in initiating the Youth Mundial program, received compliments for team USA from the people of Pereira attending and managing the show. They were impressed with the conduct of the team as a whole. They saw improvement in every aspect of Team USA's dynamics and ethics demonstrated throughout the competition. From performance to ethics, Team USA made their mark as World Class athletes and fine ambassadors. They represented PFHA and the United States with dignity, honor, and pride. ■

# Thank You

Many individuals made the team's success possible.

Team Coaches: Sharon Londoño, Javier Suarez, Sarah King, and Carmen Micheletti

Also assisting at the event: Hiro Pelaez, who worked tirelessly behind the scenes selecting horses and managing the logistics of the team's horse bank.

Trainers: Carlos Figueroa, Luis Torres, Jaime and Jorge Suarez who assisted in Pereira.

Youth Committee Chairs: Annette Crooks and John Ocasio

Sponsors: Sociagro Paso Fino Horses, Florida Paso Fino Horse Association, Southern Regional Paso Fino Horse Association, Maestranni, Spring Lane Ranch, and Katreena Haley for all she did for the team.

Many other individuals were also responsible in both large and small ways for making this Youth Mundial possible.

## TEAM MEMBERS:

Gabriela Appleton  
Manuela Suarez  
Ana Cristina Marin  
Priscilla Santana  
Isabella Hernandez  
Jacqueline Fonts  
Coral Rodriguez  
Diego Figueroa  
Jorge Suarez  
Yean Luis Torres  
Julia Suarez  
Savannah Williams  
Julieta Suarez  
Gianna Miller  
Alexandra Amador  
Jorgianna Suarez  
Grant Griffith  
Alison Crooks  
Emily Vasquez  
Kaycee Gracia  
Melinda Anderson  
Jaimito Suarez  
Michelle Gomez  
Maaiké Clapham  
Monica Figueroa  
Brooklin Besse  
Janine Suarez  
Francheska Castro



**Team USA:** Pictured on first row from left to right: Gabriela Appleton, Ana Cristina Marin, Manuela Suarez. Row 2: Melanie Prieto, Jackie Font, Maaiké Clapham, Isabella Hernandez, Coral Rodriguez, Priscilla Santana, Jorgianna Suarez, Julieta Suarez. Row 3: Michelle Gomez, Monica Figueroa-Roman, Emily Vasquez, Savannah Williams, Kaycee Gracia, Alex Amador, Melinda Anderson, Janine Suarez, Julia Suarez. Row 4: Grant Griffith, Gianna Miller, Brooklin Besse, Alison Crooks, Diego Figueroa, Jaimie Suarez Jr., Yean Luis Torres-Aleman, Jorge Suarez, Not Pictured: Francheska Castro.

|  <b>2014 PFHA USA YOUTH MUNDIAL TEAM<br/>MEDALIST AND FINALIST<br/>PEREIRA, COLOMBIA</b> |                                   |                                      |   |
|---|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| GOLD MEDAL  | SILVER MEDAL                      | BRONZE MEDAL                         | Other Finalist  |
| Boys 12-14 Yrs.<br>Jorge Suarez Jr.   | Girls 18-20 Yrs.<br>Kaycee Gracia | Girls 18-20 Yrs.<br>Alison Crooks    | Girls 12-14 Yrs.<br>1 <sup>st</sup> Finalist/3 <sup>rd</sup> Place<br>Coral Rodriguez   |
| Girls 15-17 Yrs.<br>Julia Suarez  |                                   | Boys 18-20 Yrs.<br>Jaimie Suarez Jr. | Boys 12-14 Yrs.<br>1 <sup>st</sup> Finalist 3 <sup>rd</sup> Place<br>Yean Luis Torres   |
|   |                                   |                                      | Boys 12-14 Yrs.<br>2 <sup>nd</sup> Finalist 4 <sup>th</sup> Place<br>Diego Figueroa     |
|   |                                   |                                      | Girls 21-24 Yrs.<br>2 <sup>nd</sup> Finalist / 4 <sup>th</sup> Place<br>Michelle Gomez  |
|   |                                   |                                      | Girls 21-24 Yrs.<br>3 <sup>rd</sup> Finalist / 5 <sup>th</sup> Place<br>Monica Figueroa |
|   |                                   |                                      | Girls 15-17 Yrs.<br>3 <sup>rd</sup> Finalist/ 5 <sup>th</sup> Place<br>Alexandra Amador |