

“Why Fresno?” Nine times out of ten, this was the first question I would get upon telling my peers, family members and friends where I had chosen to participate in collegiate athletics. If I’m being completely honest, the question had me a little stumped at first. I would typically respond with something like “well, Fresno is one of two schools on the entire West Coast that has a Division One Equestrian Team, so I figured it was the best option for my goals as an athlete!” While this answer would suffice for answering superficial questions in passing with friend, this query gave me the urge to think deeper. Why would I, a county-raised Meridian High School graduate, choose to move 850 miles south to the big, vastly different community of Fresno, California?

You could say that my journey towards becoming a collegiate athlete started all the way back when I was seven years old, when my parents enrolled me in horseback riding lessons. At the time, I was too shy to really enjoy traditional team sports, and I had always possessed a love for animals. Naturally, I fell in love with the sport and quickly became involved with the Whatcom County 4-H program. From ages 9 to 16, I participated in two different local clubs and had an abundance of success showing horses at the Lynden and Puyallup Fairs. When I began high school, I joined the Ferndale High School Equestrian Team. This is an organization where high school kids all over Whatcom County can compete and earn varsity letters for competing with their horses, much like traditional high school sports. Through this, I won several state championships and had many top placings. However, after the strike of COVID-19, the high school equestrian competitions were cancelled during my junior year. This tragedy just so happened to be a blessing in disguise, though, as it probed me to become a member of the American Quarter Horse Youth Association. It was through this amazing group that I learned about competing in Division I Equestrian college athletics, and immediately made that my ultimate goal.

With the help of my trainer and friends who also wanted to compete in the college equestrian realm, I began reaching out to college coaches. I sent videos of my skills, placings I’d earned, and did my best to get my name out there as much as possible. There are less than twenty schools in the entire nation that participate in Division I Equestrian sports, and unfortunately for me, I was late to the game. As a junior, about half of the schools I reached out to informed me that the recruiting class of 2021 equestrian athletes was already full. In the fall of 2019, I finally got a response from Fresno State University, inviting me to come tour the school on an official visit. Upon arriving in Fresno, California, not only did I fall in love with the sight of palm trees and warm weather, but the team welcomed me with such incredible kindness. I got to witness the beauty of what previously had only been an individual sport, morphed into a team sport. The way that the girls supported each other in competition was like no other, and the way in which they treated me like I was already a part of the team completely sealed the deal. Shortly after my visit, I announced my verbal commitment to begin riding on their team in the fall of 2021.

While finally making my dreams of being a collegiate athlete a reality was extremely exciting, the excessive happiness came with excessive nervousness. I was sure that moving to California was the right choice for me but was also a bit fearful of moving somewhere that I did not know a single soul. I truly do believe that growing up in the small community of Laurel served me well in moving to an environment like Fresno State and joining their equestrian team. Having grown up with the same class of about eighty kids and forming close, long-lasting relationships with my peers assisted me in doing the same when I moved to a brand-new state. I was able to take my small-town, tight-knit community experience and bring that with me into my relationships with the girls on the equestrian team and while meeting all sorts of people at Fresno State University. This is a skill unlike any other and is so important for creating that feeling of “home”, even when you’re nowhere close. I most definitely have the Meridian School

District to thank for that, along with all the friendships I've made along the way that helped me to feel confident in my decision to jump out of my comfort zone.

After completing my first year of school at Fresno State, I am even more certain that I made the right choice. Moving to California has not only expanded my horizons as an athlete and scholar, but as a young adult. Leaving Washington and experiencing life in a different state has forced me to learn so many essential life lessons, experience living in a completely different climate, and networking with countless different people from all over the country, all thanks to choosing collegiate athletics and a little bit of courage. I feel so thankful that I have been able to compete in the sport that I love with such a supportive group of girls and am so blessed to have grown up in a community which prepared and encouraged me to make that leap of faith.