



*LEFT: Only-Else and Kaylawna Smith-Cook win the 2024 USEA YEH West Coast 5-Year-Old Championship.  
RIGHT: MBF Dig Deep and Andrea Baxter win the 2024 USEA YEH West Coast 4-Year-Old Championship.  
Photo credit: Tina Fitch Photography*

## **High Hopes Become Reality at 2024 Dutta Corp. USEA Young Event Horse West Coast Championships**

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By Jonathan Horowitz

*Paso Robles, CA* — Both Kaylawna Smith-Cook with her 5-year-old Only-Else and Andrea Baxter with her 4-year-old MBF Dig Deep said that their first impression of their young horses less than a year ago was that they would become champions. Those high hopes became reality at the Dutta Corp. USEA Young Event Horse (YEH) West Coast Championships at Twin Rivers Ranch in Paso Robles, California, on October 25-26.

For Smith-Cook and the bay Dutch Warmblood mare (Idrigill x Kapry-Else) owned by Bonner Carpenter, that initial moment of championship aspirations came when she first saw “Elsa” at the farm of five-star Australian eventer Sammi Birch in England in December 2023.

“My first impression of her was that she picked up the trot and then she cantered, and I was like, ‘OK, I don’t need to see any more.’ I didn’t even need to see her jump,” Smith-Cook recalled. “She’s just a beautiful mare and she’s a worker, and I love that about her. The more you ask of her, the harder she tries. She’s got a little bit of sass in there, so she’s not just a ‘Yes, ma’am.’ I just appreciate all of her little quirky traits.”

The first year of their partnership culminated with earning the highest score out of both the YEH West Coast and East Coast championships. The 90.15 from YEH championship judges Sally Ike of the United States and Christian Schacht of Germany was punctuated by having the best score of 64.60 (out of 70) for their jump test, gallop, and general impression on the course designed by Adri Doyal on Saturday. That followed having the best conformation score of 8.45 (out of 10) and being tied for the best dressage score of 17.10 (out of 20) on Friday.



*Only-Else and Kaylawna Smith-Cook. Tina Fitch Photography.*

“As soon as I went into the warmup, it’s like she was excited and knew there was something exciting and worth her while,” Smith-Cook said. “It was very nice to be rewarded and for the judges to really see her potential.”

They are now first in line to be awarded the prestigious [Holekamp/Turner YEH Lion d’Angers Grant](#) to represent the United States should they qualify for the FEI WBFSH Eventing World Breeding Championships in Le Lion D’Angers, France, in 2026 when the mare is 7 years old. In 2024, the Holekamp/Turner Grant went to That’s Me Z (Take A Chance On Me Z x Venetia) and Tommy Greengard, the 2022 winner of the 5-year-old West Coast championship.

“I’m so thrilled, and I’m so excited for the next few years to develop her and hopefully be able to take advantage of the grant,” Smith-Cook said. “What’s most important to me is that the horse is confident, and if she’s ready, it’s great that we’re in a great place to take her over there. I think she is a very brave horse, and she has all the pieces in a horse that I would think about that in the future.”

The top 5-year-old YEH championship score has now come out of the West Coast for two of the past three years. However, more than just the winner, the quality at the West Coast championships was evident across the board, as 10 of the 13 5-year-old entries had scores of 80.00 or higher, compared to 14 out of the 39 5-year-old entries in the East Coast championships.

The 5-year-old West Coast reserve champion was Fary Prince, a bay British Sport Horse gelding (The After Party x Farytale Cooley) bred and owned by Hulme Equestrian and ridden Helen Alliston, with a score of 87.85. That is the fourth-best out of both 5-year-old championships in 2024.

“The main thing with him is that he’s very competitive because of his vibe—so relaxed and just a cool customer,” said Alliston, who was competing in her first YEH West Coast Championships. “The cross-country was awesome. It was a great course—challenging but fun and educational. It was fun to feel him gallop a little bit at the end because you don’t get to go that speed at Training level, which he does now.”

The Safe Harbor Award for the most rider-friendly mount went to the gray Zangersheide gelding Cupido Van de Hoge Dijken Z (Campino Gold x Cendrillon de L’herse) ridden by Allyson Hartenburg.



*MBF Dig Deep and Andrea Baxter. Tina Fitch Photography.*

Following her win in the 2023 5-year-old West Coast championship with Camelot PJ (Colman x Hauptstutbuch Evita), Baxter won the 2024 4-year-old West Coast championship with MBF Dig Deep (Golddigger x Amber). She acquired MBF Dig Deep from the Goresbridge Go For Gold auction in Ireland in November 2023, and he came to the United States in February 2024.

“I felt like he was a clear winner from the minute he landed here,” Baxter said. “I didn’t really know he was that nice when I bought him. I bought him as a resale project, but the minute he landed here, I was immediately impressed with him, and he instantly got taken off the roster of for sale.”

However, Baxter said that she didn’t fully start training and competing the bay Dutch Warmblood gelding until August after her five-star mare Indy 500 (Cromwell x Tensofthousands) passed away.

“After ‘Indy’ died, I needed a distraction,” she said. “So, I dragged the feral 4-year-old out of the field to sort of scare some new adrenaline out of me.”

Referred to in the barn as “Dig Deep”—with Baxter explaining that “he’s doesn’t really have a nickname because he’s kind of a serious guy”—he showed how serious he is about eventing.

“He takes on challenges with a positive, forward aggression and doesn’t have a backward bone in his body,” Baxter said.

Their final score of 86.30, third-best out of both 4-year-old championships, included the top jump test and potential score of 61.65 and dressage score of 16.90.

“He is beautiful,” Baxter said. “His conformation is beautiful. He’s a beautiful mover. He’s super, super careful in the show jumping and absolutely brave cross-country. As we all know, that’s what we’re looking for in an event horse, so I’m just really excited.”

It’s been a banner year for Bryan Flynn’s MBF Sporthorses, who also sourced the winner of the USEF/USEA Developing Horse National Championship in the CCI2\*YH-S division for 6-year-olds at Morven in Virginia in Starburst (Sligo Candy Boy x Monalease) ridden by Alexandra Knowles.



*MBF Dig Deep and Andrea Baxter. Tina Fitch Photography.*

The 4-year-old West Coast reserve champion was Markonix, a bay Irish Sport Horse gelding (Echonix x High Offley Miss Arko) ridden by Michlynn Sterling and sourced from Gemma Phelan of Beechfield Stables Sport Horses in Ireland.

Three out of the five in the 4-year-old West Coast championship had scores better than 80.00 compared to six out of the 30 in the 4-year-old East Coast championship.

“The quality this year was amazing; it was crazy,” Sterling said. “They’re such better horses for this. I could just feel them growing—the atmosphere and getting in the big arena with the flags and banners and everything, to Adri built a serious test to show their scope and what they can do.”

Sterling rode the most entries in the YEH West Coast Championships with four. She has now competed in four of the five YEH West Coast Championships since they became a standalone event at Twin Rivers starting in 2020 but said this year was particularly meaningful because she has come back from a broken neck sustained in January.

“I ended up with a T1 compression fracture and a brachial plexus injury, so I couldn’t move my left arm,” she said. “To be able to come back, I had to take a deep breath and decided to focus on the young horses this year, as you can see from my record. My goal was to learn how to show them off better and just be better. Andrea Baxter has been a saint in helping me learn how to do that. One thing is having quality horses, but the other is being able to show them off. I really feel like this year I learned how to do that, and they all benefited.”

Sterling echoed the sentiments of those that left Twin Rivers excited about the future eventing prospects of their young horses.

“I love this program, and it’s amazing,” she said. “It just teaches the horses and as a rider to go forward and be positive.”

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