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Grassroots Indoor Competition Planned for Syracuse, New York, Area

HITS President and CEO Tom Struzzieri reveals plans for a new championship outside of Syracuse.

NANCY JAFFER · 21 HOURS AGO

An indoor horse show for grassroots competitors is being organized for the last week of October at the new Empire Expo Center outside of Syracuse, HITS impresario Tom Struzzieri revealed today.

"It's been brewing awhile," Tom said of plans for the Oct. 24-28 HITS Indoor Championship. The venue at the New York State Fairgrounds originally was going to be an equine facility, he noted, but it has been expanded to multi-purpose use.

"I think it's going to be spectacular for horse shows," said Tom, adding HITS "had a little bit of input in the design."

The 136,000-square-foot multi-purpose venue will be largest events facility north of New York City and between Boston and Cleveland. It offers 4,000 seats and space for 500 exhibit booths.

John Madden has been hired "as a consultant for the project, because that's his home turf up there, being from (nearby) Cazenovia, and Beezie is famous in that town, so that helps," said Tom. Although the show wouldn't have any classes in which she could ride, he would like to have her there for one night to greet exhibitors and spectators.

John ran the Syracuse Invitational in the heart of the city, where it was joined by the National Horse Show until the latter moved to Kentucky in 2011. The Syracuse show ended its run as a result. While it was being presented, however, Syracuse helped develop a strong fan base for Beezie in the region, and increased interest in equestrian sport by bringing in competitors from overseas.

Although the new show will run in the same time frame as the Washington International, Tom doesn't see it as competing with the fixture in the nation's capital.

"I wouldn't say it runs against Washington, because their focus is a whole lot different," he explained.

"They do a wonderful job with their FEI [classes] and offering a nice event, but I think there's lots of clients that aren't served that week and I think we can fit right in. I think where we're missing is... those lower levels right now."

He also doesn't see the HITS indoor conflicting with the first U.S. Hunter Jumper Association National Championship, which will run in Las Vegas during November. Tom, who is chairman of the committee for that competition, notes it has a different format, with riders qualifying through their zones.

"It's more structured, following the USHJA pattern. They're not going to compete with each other, they're just going to be another alternative for bringing more people into the sport," Tom observed, saying he would be surprised if riders from anywhere but the Northeast came to the Syracuse show.

"It's much more of a regional thing, especially these first few years," he pointed out.

In contrast, the USHJA horse show, which "is not grass roots," will move around the country in the coming years. "That's going to be a little bit of a different animal," Tom maintained.

Once people have a goal to attain, "we can start to show people horse showing is a worthwhile activity that has some rewards at the end," he said. That was particularly the case when the National Horse Show was in New York City's Madison Square Garden. It was commonly called the tail that wagged the dog of the horse show year, because everyone wanted to qualify and would go to as many shows as needed during the year to attain that goal.

The grassroots indoor, a U.S. Equestrian Federation Local show which is offering, hunters, jumpers and equitation, will not have any fences higher than 3-foot-9. Qualifying will not be required for the first year of the show.

Tom compared it to September's Marshall & Sterling finals at the HITS showgrounds in Saugerties, New York, which he says is the company's most popular horse show.

"We're going to emulate that," Tom commented. He also noted that charges to exhibitors will be less than "has historically been charged" at indoor shows.