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# A suburb bets on horses, but not in the way you think

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Tom Struzzi, owner of Hits

Photo by John R. Boehm

The south suburbs were devastated three years ago when the owners of the troubled Balmoral Park harness track in far south suburban Crete abruptly closed it. Horses had been running there since the mid-1920s, and with mostly empty farmland surrounding the track, it was hard to imagine any way of reviving its fortunes.

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Now, horses are back at Balmoral, though they aren't hitched to sulky carts. An upstate New York firm called Hits acquired the 200-acre track and surrounding barns out of bankruptcy late in 2016, at a bargain price of less than \$3 million, and has repurposed it as one of the nation's premier horse show venues featuring hunters and jumpers. The dirt track is gone, replaced by 5-foot barriers and a well-mannered audience watching performers clad in the staunchly English tradition of scarlet coats and tan breeches.

The blue-collar town of Crete, population 8,300, is an unlikely backdrop for a sport that formerly was practiced in such wealthy suburbs as Barrington, Oak Brook, Wayne and Wheaton around metro Chicago. But nearly all the competing facilities in those towns have gone out of business, supplanted by the massive scale of Balmoral, which is big enough to house nine show rings, 1,500 horse stalls and a grandstand with seating for 35,000 spectators. By most standards, Balmoral suddenly ranks as the biggest horse show facility anywhere.

Tom Struzzieri, the owner of Hits (formerly Horse Shows in the Sun), has a half-dozen facilities spread between Palm Springs, Calif., and Saugerties, N.Y. Of some 1,700 horse shows in the U.S. every year, Hits stages 70 of them. Of the biggest 100 shows, it owns 40. Struzzieri, who grew up on Long Island with show horses of his own, offers several Grand Prix competitions each year with million-dollar prizes (Balmoral tops out at \$500,000, at an event scheduled for August). Nobody else in the U.S. comes close.

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"The big prize money attracts the best riders," says Kevin Price, executive director of the U.S. Hunter Jumper Association in Lexington, Ky. "Hits has grown at an impressive rate. Harness tracks have fallen on hard times in a lot of places, and the reuse of Balmoral has been a win-win situation for everybody involved."

### **MILLIONS INVESTED**

Struzziari, who poured \$10 million of Hits money into Balmoral beyond the purchase price to recondition old barns and erect the rings, says he lost money last year in Crete and will be lucky to break even this year on 13 weeks of summer shows. But the Midwest was starved for top-flight competition—show jumping is centered on the East and West coasts—and his initial search several years ago for a venue had taken him to farms south of Rockford holding scant promise.

"We were in the right place at the right time when Balmoral became available," Struzziari says. He's kept much of the old harness track memorabilia intact, down to the betting windows and posters on the walls, as well as the original finish line, maintained in the middle of the Grand Prix ring. "We wanted an old-time horsey ambiance here," he explains. "The horses boarding here today can sense the history of the place. It gives them comfort."

Local performers aren't complaining. Steve Schaefer, a professional rider who owns a farm in the western Kane County town of Maple Park, competes for prize money nearly every weekend through the summer at Balmoral before moving on to Florida to compete in the winter. "This facility was a fabulous idea," he says. "There may be no other facility in the country like this. Tom is attracting a strong following."

Europe was once home to the biggest horse show events each summer, but Hits' lofty prizes at Balmoral, where 75 are directly employed and \$3 million will be offered this year, has managed to attract an international audience. Riders from 15 countries will be in residence in Crete in coming weeks. Gonzalo Estelles, a trainer from Argentina, brought four horses and two riders to Balmoral for the summer. "There isn't a show-jumping place this nice anywhere in South America," he says through an interpreter.

Michael Einhorn, Crete's mayor for 33 years, is hoping to attract hotel and restaurant development to town to cater to the Balmoral visitors. "We have a lot of property here zoned for development and ready to go, but nobody really interested yet," Einhorn says. He says that a new home hasn't been built in Crete in over a decade, and the state of Indiana, three miles to the east, has siphoned away development. The CSX railroad has **planned a \$230 million intermodal center** not far from Balmoral on 1,100 acres it acquired in 2007, but it is under review by CSX.

"As it is, the arrival of Hits here was a dream come true for us," Einhorn says. "It's one thing dealing with a storefront that goes dark downtown. Without Hits, what were we going to do with that 200-acre racetrack after it closed?"

Hits is hoping only for more spectators and sponsors now. Advertisements come from boot-makers and equine feed companies like Purina, but not the national names such as BMW that management covets. Hardly anybody bothers to watch classes on weekdays, while crowds on the busiest weekends top out at 5,000 or so (tickets are \$5 on Saturdays; skyboxes in the covered grandstands can be rented). Hits also charges weekly rent to house the horses and an entry fee into every class they run; concessions and gifts offer another revenue stream.

Horse jumping, unique as the only Olympic sport in which men and women compete directly against each other, is an elite endeavor that may never appeal to the masses. "Even so, we have got to do more to market the sport," Struzziari says. "We can get much bigger here."



Photo by John R. Boehm