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IN OUR OPINION

Editorial: Welcome home to HITS 2016

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The 2016 edition of Horse Shows in the Sun, or HITS, opened Tuesday. It's one of the biggest events of the year in Ocala/Marion County — big enough to justify its own local economic impact assessment and to cause a measurable uptick in local business activity, from farriers and feed stores to restaurants and real estate.

It wasn't always that way. HITS founder and CEO Tom Struzzieri came to North Florida in 1982 looking to start the hunter/jumper series. At the time, the largest such event in the country had 600 stalls for competitors. Struzzieri could only dream that HITS would one day reach that magnitude.

Well, it turns out dreams do come true. At its home at HITS Post Time Farm, on U.S. 27 west of Ocala, Struzzieri's organization today boasts more than 2,400 stalls. During the 10-week event, some 2,000 horses are expected to compete every week, bringing with them thousands more riders, parents, trainers and other support personnel.

In the process, tens of thousands of spectators also will pass through the Post Time gates, culminating with HITS/Ocala's grand finale, the \$200,000 qualifier for the Furusiyya FEI Nations Cup \$1 million Grand Prix, which last year saw 10,000 turn out to watch some of the world's best jumping horses.

What does it all mean to Ocala/Marion County? Well, an economic impact study commissioned by HITS in 2014 calculated the event has a \$63 million direct economic impact on our community and \$90 million in total economic benefit.

And having an equine event of such size and prestige certainly burnishes our community's credentials as the Horse Capital of the World.

Over the years, however, HITS has evolved into more than one of the world's biggest and most respected hunter/jumper events. It has become a part of our community. Sure, the competition only past 10 weeks, but that has not stopped Struzzieri & Co. from becoming ingrained in our community.

Indeed, HITS this year initiated a two-week hunter/jumper show in December, the sole aim of which is to extend the time HITS competitors spend in Ocala/Marion County.

"Our goal is to get people to spend the winter with us, so we're trying to spread the season out," Struzzieri told the Star-Banner.

Moreover, after adding the \$200,000 qualifier for the Furusiyya FEI Nations Cup \$1 million Grand Prix to its line-up last year, HITS is adding a \$100,000 USHJA International Hunter Derby this year,

HITS, once again, just gets bigger and better — and, importantly, becomes more and more a part of the community with each passing season. Struzzieri has long been a supporter of local charities, and when HITS purchased Post Time Farm in 2002, it

gave it permanence here.

There is no question HITS long ago became more than an annual event to Ocala/Marion County. It has grown from its humble beginnings into a major business enterprise that not only makes local cash registers ring but brings visitors from all over the world to our beautiful community — more than a few of whom stay forever.

We traditionally mark the arrival of HITS each year with exuberance about what it brings to our community — all with a minimum of demand for local services and support. But what has happened over the years is that HITS is no longer a seasonal event; rather, it has made a home here.

So, instead of saying welcome back HITS, as we have so many times before, let's just say welcome home. We look forward to an exciting and successful HITS circuit over the next month and a half.

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