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HITS winter circuit draws riders, horses from US and abroad

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Among the entrants for the annual Horse Shows in the Sun (HITS) Ocala Winter Circuit are participants from Iowa, Mississippi, New York, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia. And those are just the humans. Some of the horses came from Belgium and Germany and beyond.



Alan Youngblood/Star-Banner

Megan Lomel waits with her horse Fun Eye Candy to compete during opening day action in the Grand Prix ring at Horse Shows in the Sun Ocala Winter Circuit at Post Time Farm in Ocala on Tuesday.

The 10-week circuit, which includes hunter/jumper competitions and international level Gran Prix events, opened Tuesday at the HITS Post Time Farm, a 450-acre complex at 13710 US 27, about 15 miles west of Ocala.

"We expect an average of about 2,000 (horse and rider) entrants each week," said HITS secretary Jessica Keil, as she was busy registering entrants Tuesday morning.

Amy Agricola, a HITS spokeswoman, said the jumper competition highlights the speed of the horses, which typically weigh 1,000 or more pounds, as they handle jumps. The hunter competition additionally spotlights the rhythm of clearing the jumps. The jumps range from 18 inches tall to higher than 5 feet, depending on the class, with the Gran Prix class having the tallest jumps, she explained.

In addition to competitors coming from all over the United States, especially from the north, where the winter weather often is severe, the event also draws riders and mounts from around the world.

"We have international competitions, with horses brought in from Europe," Agricola said.

The higher level competitions include the Furusiyya FEI (Fédération Equestre Internationale) Nations Cup scheduled for Week Five, the \$100,000 US Hunter Jumper Association International Hunter Derby to be held in Week Six and the \$1 million Great American Gran Prix set for Week 10.

HITS officials and the United States Equestrian Federation will invite 13 nations to participate in the Nations Cup, which will have a \$100,000 prize purse and chance for participating teams to represent their country in Barcelona, Spain, at the Furusiyya FEI Nations Cup Finals in September.

The expansive HITS complex includes competition rings; the Ocala Horse Property stadium, the site for the Gran Prix events; 27 permanent barns and 540 permanent stalls; areas for vendors; and various food service offerings.

A new feature on the property this year is a group of six landscaped barns – called a "mini-farm" by one lessee – each of which has 24 horse stalls, an attached paddock

area, warm and cold horse wash areas, clothes washer and dryer, and office. The private barns, leased out on a five-year commitment, provide comfortable and convenient housing, and training areas, for entrants. The barns are available year round, under the terms of each lease.

Agatha D'Ambra, who leases one of the barns, said she has been here since November and plans to stay until May. She likes the on-site storage and room for a treadmill for her horses.

Aster Pieters and his wife Anne Dotoli, of Tibri Farms in Rhode Island, also rent one of the six barns. Pieters, whose family is from Belgium, sometimes works with horses from Belgium and Germany.

"This is a huge improvement and a step up. It gives us about three and a half months to Americanize the horses. We have a warm wash area (inside) for the horses and the paddock area is so close," Aster Pieters said.

Pieters said the horses are fed at 6 a.m. and by 7 a.m. are in training in the paddock attached to his barn.

Mike McCormick of MTM Farms in Dallas, Texas, has 30 horses at the event. He is leasing one of the new barns and also has six horses housed in a multi-farm tent.

"This barn is like a mini-farm here for us. It used to take a half a day for us to take the horses out and go to the work area," McCormick said.

Rider Dorrie Douglas, with MTM, said it's "great" to have the paddock area attached to each barn where the horses can be readily worked.

"How can you not smile when you start out in a room like this," McCormick said as he showed off one of the rooms, with a sofa and a mock fireplace in the entryway.

The annual show has a huge economic impact each year. A study commissioned by HITS in 2014 showed the event brought \$63 million in direct expenditures from participants and spectators, which generated more than \$90 million in total economic benefits.

In addition, in December 2015, the organization hosted the inaugural two-week Ocala Holiday Classic, which, officials said, they hope to duplicate in years to come, giving participants opportunities to compete in Florida sooner and for a longer stretch of time.

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