

Balmoral Park transformation underway



By **Mike Nolan**

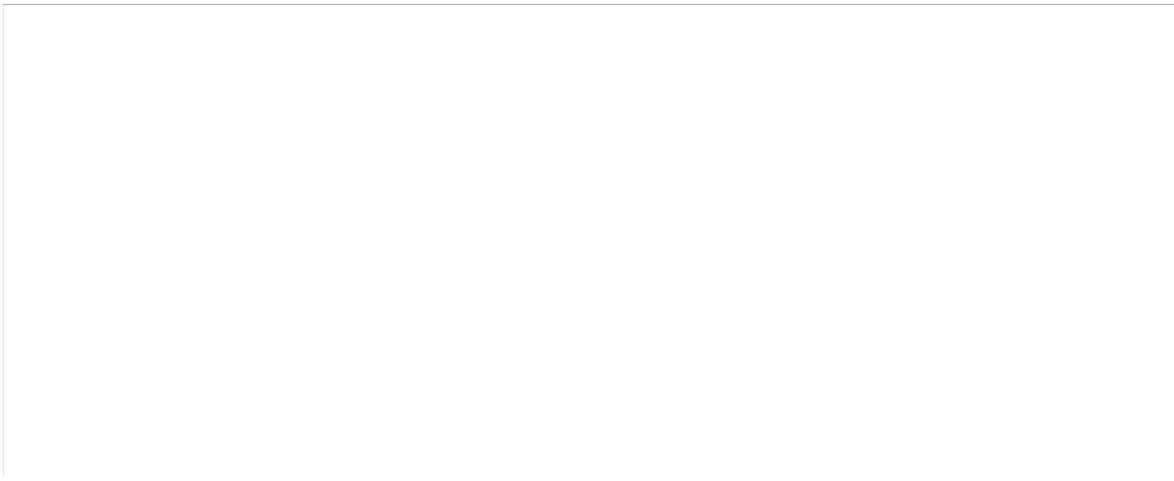
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More than a year after Balmoral Park hosted its final harness races, the storied track's transformation into a new destination for horse enthusiasts is taking shape.

Come May, the 200-acre property is expected to attract thousands of participants and spectators to horse show-jumping competitions as part of a circuit of similar events held around the country by the track's new owner, Horse Shows in the Sun, or HITS.

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Much of the oval track and a good chunk of the infield are gone, being replaced with 10 arenas, or rings, where riders will compete. The main ring, closest to Balmoral's grandstand, will incorporate the track's tote board and finish line marker.

Competitions will start in mid-May and continue through September, and what HITS hopes to bring to south suburban Crete and the surrounding area is a replica of the show-jumping events it holds at sites around the United States, including at properties it owns near Ocala, Fla.; in Thermal, Calif., near Palm Springs; Culpeper, Va.; and its home base in Saugerties, N.Y.

It's expected that, during any given week, between 3,000 and 5,000 people directly or indirectly connected with the competitions, excluding spectators, could make Balmoral and the surrounding area their home, according to Siri DuPont-Hurley, HITS' administrative coordinator at Balmoral.

"People who compete will make this area their home for the summer," DuPont-Hurley said. "They'll be staying in hotels, renting homes. It will be a real boost."

A study done in 2014 for HITS following its 10 weeks of competitions in Ocala that year showed that direct spending in that area totaled \$63 million, and DuPont-Hurley said that Saugerties, a small community in upstate New York, has experienced a resurgence due to the horse shows. With a downtown area pocked with empty storefronts, Saugerties is now a "bustling destination," and that art galleries and hotels have sprung up since the town was added to the HITS competition circuit.

Apart from the immediate Chicago and Southland areas, the "Midwest has a strong equestrian community that usually has to travel far" to attend competitions, such as those that will be held at Balmoral, she said of the facility's potential draw.

Plans for non-horse oriented events such as concerts, festivals, car shows and antique shows are also being discussed to "make it a year-round facility," she said.

HITS closed last spring on its purchase of Balmoral, 26435 S. Dixie Highway, for \$1.6 million, although it's not disclosing how much is being spent on renovating the property.

Some areas, such as the 4,400-seat grandstand and adjacent stables, are requiring little work, but the track's aging 23 barns are being refurbished, including installing new roofs and new, roomier stalls for horses.

"The horses' safety and comfort is paramount," DuPont-Hurley said.

During show weeks, which will run from Wednesday through Sunday, all 10 competition rings might be having events going on simultaneously, and while there will be viewing from the enclosed grandstands, those who want to get a closer look will be able to stroll along pedestrian paths connecting the rings, which will have their own seating areas, she said.

The green space in between the rings will be turned into a park-like setting, with additional trees being planted.

"We want to keep the 'Park' part of Balmoral Park intact," DuPont-Hurley said.

Also, a fenced-in area near the park's administration building outside the main gate will be turned into a leash-free dog park, she said.

The lower level of the grandstand area will feature an indoor marketplace of vendors offering horse tack and equipment, clothing, gifts and other merchandise, she said.

Many features inside the grandstand, including historic photos, are being kept in place to preserve the history of the track, which opened in 1926 as Lincoln Fields and changed to Balmoral in 1955 under new ownership.

"It (the track) means a lot to a lot of people," DuPont-Hurley said. "We're happy to be able to bring horses back here."

HITS hopes to attract people who don't actively follow the equestrian competitions, and there will not be an admission charge for most of the events held at Balmoral, she said.

"We hope it becomes a great spectator destination," she said.

HITS also closed recently on the purchase of the nearby Balmoral Woods golf course, which will be an added amenity for those taking part in the competitions, DuPont-Hurley said.

Balmoral's owners, who also operated Maywood Park in Melrose Park, filed for bankruptcy in December

2014, and HITS bought Balmoral during the course of the bankruptcy case.

Over the years, the list of Balmoral's owners has included high-profile names such as the late shopping mall magnate Edward DeBartolo Sr., and the family of late New York Yankees owner [George Steinbrenner](#), according to Balmoral and public records.

At Balmoral, HITS is partnering with Pat Boyle of Showplace Productions, which organizes similar show jumping events in the Chicago area and Midwest, to coordinate shows at Balmoral.

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