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IN OUR OPINION

HITS just gets bigger and better

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When Horse Shows in the Sun, or HITS as we know it, came to Ocala 32 years ago its visionary founder Tom Struzzieri couldn't even imagine that it would become what it has.

"I'd be lying if I told you I knew it would get this big," Struzzieri told the paper last week. "Back in '82, the biggest circuit back then was at about 600 horse stalls. I thought if we could get close to that someday that would be huge. We have 2,400 horse stalls this year."

So HITS is bigger and better than anyone ever imagined, and now, as it embarked Tuesday on its 10-week 2015 edition, it is going to get even bigger and even better.

Besides the 2,400 horse stalls that make HITS one of the largest events of its kind in the country, it is expected to bring some 2,000 horses — with riders, trainers, families and support staff — to Ocala/Marion County each and every week.

In addition to the regular jumping competitions that HITS has hosted in the past, this year HITS will host the \$200,000 Furusiyya FEI Nations Cup, a qualifier for the Nations Cup finals to be held in Barcelona, Spain, in October. It is also new that all 10 weeks of the competition will be sanctioned by the U.S. Equestrian Federation, compared with just the final seven weeks in the past.

All this after last year, when HITS added a \$1 million grand prix event that attracted some of the best jumpers in the world.

It is hard for us to not gush over what Struzzieri has created in our midst.

Not only has HITS made Ocala its home for the past three decades, it also has its own facility in northwest Marion County — the HITS Post Time Farm, where there are now 10 rings for practice and competition.

In addition, a growing number of participants have also made Marion County their part-time home, purchasing increasing numbers of homes and farms surrounding Post Time and leaving HITS's indelible mark on our community year-round.

Then there is the dollars and cents of it all.

For years we have recognized the tens of millions of dollars HITS pumps into local cash registers for everything from feed and tack to hotel rooms and food.

Struzzieri and his organization, though, last year hired an independent consultant, Sports Management Research Institute, to assess its true economic impact on Ocala/Marion County.

It found that the 10-week event is responsible for \$63 million in direct spending by participants and spectators and more than \$90 million in overall economic impact. And it all comes with a minimal need for public safety or other taxpayer-financed

services.

HITS is back!

We welcome them and their participants and thank Struzzieri and Co. for bringing this wonderful signature equine event to our community and keeping it here.

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