

## HITS event to expand: annual equine show to span 12 weeks

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The annual HITS horse show is expanding again in both events and infrastructure.

The Ocala winter circuit of Horse Shows in the Sun will add two more weeks of competition in December, in addition to the 10 weeks of consecutive events that annually run from January through March.



Bruce Ackerman/Star-Banner

The added weeks are scheduled from Dec. 9-20. After the holidays, the shows will start again on Jan. 19 and continue through March 28. All are United States Equestrian Federation rated shows.

At the HITS Post Time Farm, at 13710 US 27, west of Ocala, construction on a new hunter stadium course and custom barns has begun.

The hunter stadium will complement the show jumping stadium, which was built in 2013. Show hunter horses are judged on their movement, temperament and jumping ability over fences. Show jumper equines are judged only on jumping ability.

"I didn't want the hunters to think we didn't value them. Hunters are a big, big part of our business. More than 65 percent of our competitors are hunters. We're building a brand new ring for them. It's going to be imbedded among the rolling hills and big oaks. It's going to be a special place," said Tom Struzzieri, founder and CEO of HITS.

With the new stadium also comes a featured event: The \$100,000 United States Hunter Jumper Association International Hunter Derby, which is scheduled for the week of Feb. 23-28.

"That would match the biggest hunter classes out there. It's going to attract hunters from all over the country. Ocala is known for it hunters," Struzzieri said.

Dana Noga, owner of Lone Palm Stables in Ocala, is looking forward to the new stadium. Noga trains both hunter and jumper students at her facility and competes at HITS every year.

"I think it's great that HITS is recognizing the hunter riders by building them their own stadium. It's a great addition to the horse show," said Noga, who started Lone Palm seven years ago.

Six permanent barns, with a total of 120 stalls, are also under construction. The barns were pre-leased to six trainers with larger strings of horses and clients.

"It's all part of making it a real season down there," said Struzzieri, who is based in Saugerties, N.Y.

With the addition of the new barns, there are now nearly 700 permanent stalls on the 450-acre farm. Still, the event requires about 2,400 stalls to accommodate the number of competitors. The rest of the stalls are located in temporary tent barns, which can get cramped.

With the two new December shows, the circuit stretches to nearly four months.

“That’s a long time to keep your horse in a portable stall, but, if you have the means, you can have a custom, high-end barn on the property,” Struzziere said, adding that he hopes to add additional barns in the coming years.

HITS has come a long way since the first event was held in Gainesville in 1982. The organization now holds events across the country, including in Arizona, California and New York, hosting tens of thousands of horses and competitors and awarding millions in prize money.

An economic impact study commissioned by HITS in 2014 showed the Ocala event brought \$63 million in direct expenditures from participants and spectators, which generated more than \$90 million in total economic benefits locally.

The study, conducted by Sports Management Research Institute, showed the majority of spending by show competitors was horse related, but they also spent plenty on lodging, restaurant, entertainment and retail expenses.

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