



Uniting^{the} Horse *W*orld

USEF Plans for a National
All-Breeds Championship

By Amber Heintzberger

With the Alltech™ FEI World Equestrian Games taking center stage at the Kentucky Horse Park in 2010, the United States Equestrian Federation (USEF) is considering ways to keep equestrianism in the spotlight and make use of the infrastructure that will be established for the games. USEF Chief Executive Officer John Long thinks that the best way to do this is with an all-breeds U.S. championship to be held annually beginning in 2011.

“The WEG is going to be here in 2010, and while it’s exciting to think about what it entails, in as much as they have never been held outside Europe before, it isn’t too early to ask what will be the legacy?” asked Long. “To me, it is an opportunity to create something for horse sport in America that can be transforming. I believe an all-breed horse show made for television could have that kind of transformational impact.”

The show could be held at the Kentucky Horse Park. “The State has invested heavily,” said Long. “\$40-million will be spent on the new indoor arena, and another outdoor will be constructed shortly. The infrastructure is unique, so certainly for many years after 2010, we could hold the national show there.”

An all-breeds show is not a new idea. Years ago, they were a very ordinary undertaking. Judith Werner grew up showing Saddlebreds in Missouri and has shown from grassroots to the top levels. She and her husband, Roy, have a new large breeding farm where they stand the stallion Designed and breed their own horses. Werner is on the board of the American Saddlebred Horse Association and is an officer of the USEF.

“I went to a lot of all-breeds shows years ago,” she recalled. “My opinion is that when we all become individualists, we lose something special. Back then, we would start with maybe a hunter class, then Saddlebreds, then Morgans. It was not only fun, it was good business. There were more people with multiple breeds competing in multiple disciplines. Today, we have expanded the classes and with shows as long as they are, so that everyone gets what they want, the shows are bigger and harder to run. If you look at the book, there is too much offered.”

Putting together an all-breeds championship would not only be something of a novelty in today’s more specialized horse world, it could bring together the various breeds and disciplines on a level deeper than just competition. Ideally, it would introduce ideas across disciplines and breeds and, with skillful marketing, open up horse sports to the general public.

Organizational Ideas

Organizing a show on such a grand scale is not without its challenges. Tony Hitchcock, Horse Shows in the Sun (HITS) Senior Vice President and former Executive Director of the Hampton Classic Horse Show in New York, has a few ideas for how to undertake this organizational monolith.

“Clearly, there are three things to consider,” he said. “Can we secure the dates? For any sanctioned show, there is a requirement that your dates do not conflict with another show within a radius of a certain mileage. The first step is to make sure that you can have the dates.

“Let’s assume that they secure the date; next is the competition,” he continued. “It has to be something that the competitors are going to want to leave what they non-



USEF Archives

Above: John Long, USEF’s CEO, has a vision for an all-breed national horse show.

Left: Judith Werner believes there should be a qualification process in place.

Below: Tony Hitchcock with wife, Jean Lindgren. Hitchcock has considered some of the logistics of an all-breed show and believes it can be done.



Diana DeKosa



Vic Congre



Howard Schatzberg

Above: The ultimate show horse, the American Saddlebred has the ring presence and flashiness to win against other breeds.

Right: Georgie Green believes the all-breed format could benefit the entire horse community.

ally the best in each breed compete in a final class for best in show. “To make it like Westminster, you would probably have to have the final championship be a flat class, if you wanted it to be under saddle instead of in-hand,” she suggested. “Another idea is that we have an American-bred championship for dogs bred in the U.S. It would do well to promote U.S.-bred horses, too.”

Long commented, “Think about dressage or jumping...many breeds compete in those disciplines. We could offer Best in Breed awards and Best in Show, much like the Westminster Dog Show. My guess is that a final with an Arabian, a Saddlebred, a Paint and a Morgan competing against each other would generate some excitement in the crowd.”

Since the show will be a championship, there will need to be some means of qualification. This will probably also come from the breed organizations. “It would be easy to qualify people in each group,” reasoned Werner. “I think it will depend on how many horses they can accept; maybe they will have to limit it to a certain number of horses from each group.”

In the beginning, it will take a focused assembly of organizers to get things off the ground. Long said, “Everybody thinks it’s a terrific idea, but the challenge is where to begin. It will entail lots of planning and logistical thinking. Rather than competing with breed championships, it needs to be complimentary, which means finding the right place on the calendar which can work for everyone. Each organization would handle its own qualifying procedures. There is tremendous enthusiasm, but, we need to get all the interested parties together to start the brainstorming process.”

In the end, while the USEF is behind getting the show off the ground, the Federation does not want sole responsibility for its organization. This will take the cooperation of all participating breed organizations. “I don’t think there are any problems we can’t get around, but it will be a real test in cooperation for all our organizations to make it happen,” said Long. “Because the World Equestrian Games will be such an enormous event, we simply cannot afford to squander such a tremendous opportunity for all of us. I’m confident we can make it happen.”

mally do. The only way for it to make sense is for it to be organized like the WEG or World Cup, where eventers organize eventing, hunters organize the hunters and so on; every discipline has its ‘sub show manager.’ Then, the upper-level management keeps people from killing each other and coordinates everything.

“The third thing to consider is sponsorship,” he concluded. “The Kentucky Horse Park has a proven record for getting an audience. Rolex this year had record numbers. For the portion driven by the gate, there is reason to believe that this show would be a success.”

The plan is for the show to be organized similarly to the Westminster Dog Show. The basic purpose of dog shows is to facilitate the evaluation of breeding stock for use in producing the next generations; in judging dog shows, each breed’s parent club creates a “standard,” a written description of the ideal specimen of that breed. Similarly, for a national all-breeds horse show, the breed organizations would create guidelines for judging their own horses.

Lisa Peterson is a communications director with the American Kennel Club, and she grew up riding hunter/ jumpers. Peterson explained that dogs are judged against the standard instead of against each other, like horses are. They are judged at different levels and under different classifications and eventu-



Courtesy Georgie Green

Challenges

While the organizational aspects of the show may seem daunting, Hitchcock said, "The whole idea is absolutely possible. The infrastructure will be in place, and the USEF and other national organizations are located at the Horse Park, as well. You've got to think that they could ramp up a continuing effort. I think that everyone would want to compete at the facilities where the World Equestrian Games were held. It's just how much you can cram in, since there is a finite amount of real estate.

"It will take very careful communication and coordination, and it will not be a success if it is under-budgeted, even though it is right on the heels of what we believe will be a successful World Equestrian Games," he added.

Support for the show from various breeds and disciplines will be essential for the show to be a success. "A big challenge will be getting everyone on board and understanding what good this could do, for someone to go watch and see different things, the spectacle of it," reasoned Werner. "You never know when a person in the audience will get inspired and find a barn to take riding lessons and get involved. The devil is in the details."

Georgie Green, who has spent much of her life involved with Morgans and serves on the USEF Board of Directors, thinks an all-breeds show will be good for the entire horse industry, but she does have a few questions about format. "Would it be invitational? A three-week program?" she asked.

"There are a lot of questions that would have to be answered. The variety of requirements for this show is immense," continued Green.

"We need to create a structure that encourages competition, while showcasing the animal and getting the final product to the audience," she said. "Each breed and discipline has its own issues to accommodate and to put in a positive setting. Thirty-five years ago, when I showed, it was primarily at all-breeds shows with a hunter ring, Quarter Horses, Saddlebreds, and so on. I'd show in a variety of classes. Perhaps because that was my initial exposure, it is not hard for me to imagine this as a success."

According to Jill Frieders, Chair of the Arabian Horse Association USEF Arabian Divisions Committee, involvement from the Arabian world will depend on timing. "If the event is in the fall, it may conflict with the Arabian Nationals. If there is a conflict, I think the Arabian community will not participate in favor of participating at their own Nationals. I hope we can work around this potential problem. If this is done in a way that does not conflict with our national championship show, I believe that the Arabs will participate. The Arab community loves to show, and this could be a great show."

Promotional Possibilities

In today's world, promotion is everything, and this means getting the word out via television and the Internet. People are wired, and the more information available via these methods the better.

The event might include the same disciplines as the FEI World Equestrian Games: dressage, jumping, driving, reining, eventing, endurance, vaulting and para-equestrian. "We can create whatever we want



Mike Ferraro

Above: With the many disciplines that Arabians compete in, they can excel against other breeds as well.

Below: Jill Frieders said that timing of an all-breed championship is an important factor.



Roz Gilbert



Howard Scharaberg

Above: Morgans have a history of competing against other breeds.

Below: Ellen Di Bella is excited about this opportunity to showcase all breeds of horses.

industry. I think it is likely that mainstream media might want to get involved. Maybe the show could be featured on the Animal Planet™, something like the Westminster Dog Show and the Rolex [Kentucky Three-Day Event].”

Ellen di Bella is a Morgan member delegate on the board of the USEF. She has been involved in the Morgan industry for 35 years and has a 30-acre farm in Colorado. She had a similar comment, “We need to reach as wide an audience as we can. The way to do that is through television. Equestrian sport has barely scratched the surface. It’ll have to be done carefully because some horse sports are dangerous to horses and humans, but the sky is the limit. The partnership between man and an animal and the innate appeal is overwhelming.”

Werner hopes that the idea will not be taken for granted. “I want people to really think about this idea and to understand what John and his group is trying to do—lift the level of horse sports across the board and make it something people are interested in,” she said. “The possibilities for a show like this are endless. The WEG will, I hope, kick off an interest in the U.S., and this show is the logical next step. I don’t think people in the U.S. even realize how big the WEG will be, how many people will come over for it.”

Drawing public interest is one thing, but the first step is to attract participants. “There needs to be significant prize money to draw the good horses, and there needs to be some sort of qualification process to make sure the best horses are there,” said Frieders. “I think it would be fun to have a battle of the breeds.” While she is not sure how the overall organization should work, she added, “I think it would be good to have overall champions. For example, all of the final Western pleasure horses compete for an overall championship.”

Peterson pointed out that it is not only horse people that might be interested in a show like this. “A horse show organized like a dog show could be really fun, if you think about it,” said Peterson. “I’d love to be involved in a project like this. It sounds like a lot of fun. There are also a lot of people like me, who are interested in both dogs and horses.”

Bringing Horses to the Public

It is widely recognized that equestrian sports lag behind sports like soccer, football and baseball for public recognition. As for bringing equestrian sport to the attention of the masses, Long said, “I think we are getting much closer to becoming a top tier sport. The FEI World Cup for Dressage and Show Jumping has

to create,” said Long. “It’s a blank page at this point. It needs to be big enough to capture the interest of TV networks and cable companies.”

Long is open to new and innovative ideas, too, that bring the horse world together with new technology. “Imagine if it was telecast and the audience could vote in addition to the judges—much like ‘Dancing with the Stars’? If we get it right, the program should be equal parts of horse competition and entertainment.”

Frieders thinks that an all-breeds U.S. championship is a great opportunity for the different breeds to showcase their horses. Also, she said, “It will be a great opportunity for the public to get to see the best-of-the-best from all of the breeds at one venue. They will be able to compare breeds. I think it is an exciting opportunity.”

As far as benefiting equestrianism as a whole, she said, “It will be a big draw for the public. It will also be an opportunity for publicity for the horse



Diana DeFossa

now been held twice in Las Vegas, and this year it was shown on Animal Planet. Viewership of the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event on NBC climbed by 20% in 2007. All indicators are that we are going in the right direction.”

Green is also a member of the National Affiliates Working Group, which under the umbrella of the USEF, meets once a month and discusses things that benefit breeds and disciplines. “Any time the equestrian world comes together to do anything, it benefits the *entire* equestrian world,” she said. “More than just the breeds, it benefits the industry. I think most people have a love of horses, starting with little boys playing cowboys.”

Di Bella said, “I am kind of fascinated by [USEF President] David [O’Connor’s] and John’s approach to get the horse world to look at what the future can be, like taking the pieces of a puzzle and seeing how they fit together. This sounds like a wonderful opportunity to showcase the vast variety of horses in the U.S. and their different uses.”

Di Bella’s question to the strategic planning committee and board of directors is how horses will be viable in the future—for competition and pleasure—with land use and the complications of urban sprawl. “In order for the USEF to perpetuate land use where horses can thrive, we need empathy for all things horse from people across the country,” she said. “I would like to think this show could have the same effect as the Barbaro phenomenon, which was both a tragedy for the horse, but a triumph in that there is an openness to all things horse across the population.”

She thinks that putting the show together will be very complex. “The USEF will have to ponder taking a lesson from other sports and develop analysts and color commentators,” she said. “Unless the horse gets over all the jumps and wins, it’s hard to understand what horse sports are about, so the appeal should be explained to the general public.”

She laughed and said, “I am blessed to have a husband who is supportive and writes a lot of checks—because God knows, there are a lot of checks to write—but he would rather have a root canal than watch a bunch of horse show classes!” She continued, more seriously, “Racing is good at that. Even though the audience sees who crosses the finish line first, that is only a small part of the entertainment. You have to keep the audience interested a lot longer than that; putting the show together in a way that is interesting for non-horse people is critical.”

Di Bella pointed out that in today’s world of fast food, subdivisions and superhighways, horses are no longer a part of the average American’s lifestyle. “One issue

that I find interesting is perpetuating horse society and lore,” she said. “As we become an urban society, we move away from an intrinsic knowledge of horses. A show like this could bring horses to the general public and help give people a basic knowledge of agriculture and especially horses. If the USEF is going to be all about horses, they’ll have to find ways to make horses and horse sports important to the general population! I think this will be a potent and effective tool in achieving that goal.” ■

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Howard Schatzberg

Above: The Hackney’s flair could give it an edge against other gaited breeds in an all-breed show.

Left: Today, in in-hand classes, horses are judged against each other. One idea for a future in-hand class at an all-breeds show would be to judge the horses how dogs are judged in dog shows—against the breed standard.

