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## HITS underway with additional two weeks of competition

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HITS-sponsored horse shows continue to grow their presence here with an additional two weeks of competition, drawing 600 more horses for the events with an estimated economic impact of nearly \$4.5 million to the area.

Tom Struzzi, Horse Shows in the Sun founder and CEO, said that adding the additional weeks this year served multiple purposes --- namely, answering a call by riders and trainers wanting the winter season in Marion County extended and allowing HITS to grow its own business here. That growth also warrants HITS building and renting out new barns and stalls to riders, financially justifying the expansion.

"Everyone ends up satisfied with the event," Struzzi said.

The two weeks of new shows – the Ocala Holiday Classic and the Ocala Holiday Festival – began Wednesday and will run through Dec. 20. They are not officially part of HITS winter program but closely affiliated with it.

The traditional HITS Ocala Winter Circuit begins Jan. 19 and runs for 10 weeks. The Furusiyya FEI Nations Cup will return to HITS Post Time Farm on Feb. 19. HITS Ocala also culminates in March with the Great American \$1 Million Grand Prix.

The new shows will be held at HITS Post Time Farm, 13710 U.S. 27. Most of the shows during the week are free to the public. Vendors will be on hand.

Because of the two additional weeks, HITS is building six new barns, making for a total of 32 barns at the 500-acre facility. The barns offer riders a total of 700 stalls. HITS also rents out 2,000 portable stalls, Struzzi said.

HITS held its first shows at Post Time Farm in 2002 and other Marion County locations before then.

Struzzi said the 600 additional horses during the two new weeks is a good start, but expects that number to grow to about 1,000 in a couple of years.

He won't say what he paid for the two shows, which were previously owned by another company, but admitted it was hundreds of thousands of dollars. To make the two weeks work financially, the shows need a minimum of about 500 competing horses and the support staff who comes with them.

To attract that many horses and owners, he also increased prize money to \$100,000. Previously it was about \$35,000.



*Cyndi Chambers/Star-Banner*

An equestrian rider successfully completes a jump during her ride on the second day of the Ocala Holiday Classic at Post Time Farm. The event is part of the HITS circuit and was added as an additional competition.

“It’s all part of the business plan...and potentially we’ll add more weeks,” Struzziери said.

Amanda Steege, 40, a trainer and rider at HITS since 1998, said the two additional weeks is just what competitors want.

On Thursday, the trainer/rider and her client’s horse, Cascade, won the show’s First Year Green Hunter competition. The competition is for horses that for the first time are jumping over obstacles higher than 3 feet 6 inches.

Steege said the additional two weeks allows trainers and riders to stay in the area longer to compete. Then they can go home for the holidays and return for the next 10 weeks of competition.

That’s what Struzziери is counting on: that while riders travel from show to show in the summer, they stay put in warmer Marion County during the winter.

“Winters are different. You can make it a lifestyle,” he said.

The two weeks shouldn’t be viewed as an isolated 14 days, but rather part of the entire winter show package and its economic impact in the community, he said.

The economic impact of the additional two weeks alone is estimated at \$4.48 million when you take into account all the services trainers and riders and their horses need, and again when locals spend that money for other area goods and services, said Corry Locke, sports marketing specialist for the Ocala/Marion County Sports Commission.

The estimated impact of the next 10 weeks of HITS shows is estimated at \$86 million.

Struzziери said a trend is that people who come here to compete also eventually buy homes here and stay for months at a time, contributing to the tax base and spending money here.

Steege lived in New Jersey and would rent when she came to Marion County.

“Each year it seemed we were spending more and more time here and so were our clients. Absolutely, we moved here because of HITS. It’s more of a horse friendly environment,” she said.

“It’s a large (economic) impact on Marion County,” she said of HITS. “We have clients that rent here or fly in and out.”

Locke said that both HITS and the county are good for one another.

HITS’ clients and their support staffers come to the area because of the HITS shows, but also because there are hotels, restaurants, veterinarians and entertainment along with anything else trainers and riders might need, Locke said. That in turn helps HITS grow, which then again justifies more hotel rooms, restaurants and the like.

During the shows HITS will have about 100 employees on the ground overseeing 12 competition rings and a total staff roll of about 175 people. At any given time there will be 2,500 horses at HITS during the 10 weeks of top competition and about 6,250 horse owners, trainers and support staff.

Along with new barns and stalls for the extended winter circuit, a new hunter stadium course will be available.

The hunter stadium will complement the show jumping stadium built in 2013. Show hunters are judged on their movement, temperament and jumping ability over fences. Show jumpers are judged only on jumping ability and time it takes to complete

the course.

Steege said that despite the high level of competition, HITS also encourages novices to participate and offers competitive shows for riders new to the sport.

Aaron Vale, a trainers and rider competing at HITS, said that the two additional weeks, with its break before January competitions, allows riders to enter into easier competitions now and get their horses ready for next month and the spring.

Vale begin competing in HITS shows about 25 years ago. He lived in South Carolina.

“But I was spending four to five months here anyway. It just made sense for me to move here,” he said. He now owns a 75-acre farm in northwest Marion County, training 50-60 horses.

“The two weeks...gives us a little preview to (judge) our young horses,” he said. “You can judge your horse in the ring and you know you have another month to work on (problems).”

The additional two weeks means more fun and opportunities, but also more work. But he knew the work would be long and hard when he got into the business.

“You have to be driven to keep the wheels turning in this business,” he said.

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