



## Ocala HITS show rides back into town

By Carlos E. Medina

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The 10 weeks of consecutive competition brings thousands of riders and millions of dollars in revenue to Marion County.

The annual 10-week HITS Ocala Winter Circuit horse show kicked off this week for the 39th time and should draw thousands of hunter/jumper competitors from across the country.

The show, held at HITS Post Time Farm, 13710 NW U.S. 27, is one of the biggest horse shows in the country. Some \$5 million in prize money is up for grabs during the circuit, including the \$1 million Great American Grand Prix on March 22, which closes the competition.

Last August, the event organizer sold its winter circuits in California and Arizona so it could focus on the Florida event.

The results are some competitors from the West Coast are now traveling to Ocala, said Kristen Vale, a HITS spokeswoman.

Entries are up 30 percent for Ocala, and several top riders from the West Coast will compete locally, she said.

“We increased the prize money for our Sunday Grand Prix events,” Vale said.

“We have seven Olympic riders on the grounds this week. More will come from time to time.”

Mark Rarick-Varner of Dreamstead Equestrian plans to stay the full 10 weeks of the competition.

“It’s a nice show. It’s well put together. I can get the level of competition I need,”

said Rarick-Varner, who is a trainer and has nine horses at the event.

Elsie O'Connor came out Wednesday to watch some of the first day of competition.

"I've been involved with horses all my life. My granddaughter is coming down on Friday. She will be staying with me and will be showing here. I think it's a wonderful event," O'Connor said.

HITS started in 1982 with a horse show in Gainesville. In 1985, the event moved to Ocala and eventually grew into a 10-week competition. The show infuses about \$94 million into the local economy every year, according to a [2014 study](#).

Competitions run from Wednesday through Sunday. The showgrounds are open from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., and there is no admission from Wednesday through Saturday. On Sundays, Grand Prix days, admission is \$10 per person for those older than 12. This year, a season pass is available for \$20, which would allow a pass holder entry to every Grand Prix, including the \$1 million event

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