

Report Conversation

Mike Inman

By Sadie Fowler

Mike Inman, CEO of the Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration, discussed several points of interest earlier this week with the Walking Horse Report as he prepares for this year's upcoming event.

WHR: The Celebration adjusted its class schedule earlier this year and made some pretty major changes. Can you highlight those and further explain the impetus for these changes? How do you see them affecting this year's show?

Inman: The impetus was to find a way to increase value, excitement and competitiveness of each of our over 190 classes and to strive for a session ending time of noon for morning classes and 10:30 for evening sessions. That required a four-year history review of our entire schedule, class by class of over 190 classes and 49 special presentations throughout the show in terms of participation and time allotted to.

We track all that information by number of entries compared to through the gate and time taken for each down to the minute each year. To aid in that review the board created a Trainers Advisory Council consisting of the three largest barns in terms of entries from the 2016 Celebration for both flat shod and padded horses. These seven trainers with over a century of Celebration experience and horses in virtually every under saddle division did an outstanding job in evaluating trends and forecasting likely participation for upcoming years.

We also looked at each class in terms of is it worthy of a World Championship title? If so, is the history of participation sufficient to keep the class, keep the class as a stand-alone, or keep it combined with another class? At the end of the day the Trainers Advisory Committee (TAC) recommended 39 changes to the schedule and 24 were incorporated in this first of a three-year plan. The schedule committee also reviewed each of the 49 presentations and made changes there as well. We will make tremendous progress this year in terms of the two goals, excitement and efficient time usage. We also will continue to review everything as we move forward and react to trends as we see them.

WHR: Recently, it was decided to combine the Blue Ribbon yearbook and the official program. Why was this done and what are the advantages to the spectator as a result?

Inman: Another exciting effort indeed. Two things drove the decision. First a continued substantial economic loss due to printing costs in publishing two books each year. Secondly, that although the Blue Ribbon is a beautiful publication that earns a spot each year on so many people's coffee table including mine, it is rarely seen on a nightly basis at the show. By combining it our fans will see the horses that will be competing as they track the schedule and enter the ties in their program.

Also, we are limiting horse ads to corporate sponsors as an added benefit for their participation in that special partnership role. We also will be listing the top three placings from

the previous year at the top of each class so people have a quick reference in front of them and do not have to search through the book for that valuable information. So far initial reaction to the change has been very positive. I really believe our fans will truly enjoy the new format.

WHR: The Celebration has decided to host the corporate sponsor party on the first Saturday night at the Blue Ribbon Circle Club. What factors contributed to that decision?

Inman: Participation and convenience for our sponsors. Our recent parties have always been beautiful and simply top shelf. If we hear any negative feedback it is in terms of regrets that those showing early on Sunday cannot stay as long as they want due to having to get to the grounds and change to get ready for their class. By moving the party to the Blue Ribbon Club and preparing the venue accordingly we feel this will be a benefit to our sponsors as they will have more time for fellowship and relaxation, and that is the goal behind the event.

WHR: How are box seat sales going this year? What is the trend over the last five years?

Inman: Box seats continue to be in decline as they have for the last five years. We are currently down just over 40 boxes from this time last year. Local residents getting older and being unable to attend is the leading factor. We have for

several years offered boxes on the East side upper tier for as low as \$200. That is just over \$3 per seat per night for all 10 nights (a tremendous value for a family or two families coming together).

Our lower level boxes are still in high demand. Although down in attendance we are still far and away the largest attended horse show in the country, but we want it to be even better. The Celebration and our local Civic Clubs rely on attendance to be successful naturally. This is one of the benefits I think we can achieve when we reach our goals in your opening question. Younger people look for entertainment in a tighter time frame these days and we need to respond if we want to attract that customer.

WHR: What is the Celebration doing to attract local fans? For example, aren't students given free entry one night of the show?

Inman: Ahh, the \$60,000 question. First a tighter, more competitive schedule as we discussed. Today's world is driven by shorter time frames for entertainment, especially to attract the less ardent fans. We also have two new traditions designed to appeal to our local community members who want to participate but don't own a horse. First, Hat Night is the first Saturday night where everyone is encouraged to dress up and wear a hat. All of our judges and center ring folks participate as well. The response has been unreal, with over 300 people participating in the judging portion and easily twice that many just participating in the fun.

Also, veterans night, where we give two tickets and free parking to any veteran as a way to allow the Celebration and our community to honor them with a preshow center ring acknowledgement, is also well received with over 200 tickets going out last year. We are happy to see these two things grow. The student reach out is our largest, with over 9,000 free tickets being distributed. Every student in Bedford County receives two complimentary tickets to attend an evening of the show and their individual school is recognized on their special night.

WHR: Will there be a trade show this year? Any other special events you'd like to highlight?

Inman: As far as special events for our patrons, we will continue as we have in recent years. Of course the trade show in the Calsonic is a long standing tradition. Outside and in the evening we will feature Hat Night the first Saturday and veterans night as I mentioned.

We also are tremendously excited about opening a new chapter on perhaps one of our most cherished traditions and that is our white performance flag horse that opens every evening performance. After nearly two years of searching the Celebration has settled on White Diamond Dollar, a beautiful young mare owned by the McCloys from Oklahoma. She made her debut at this year's Spring Fun Show and she was simply breathtaking with Bud Seaton in the irons and expertly prepared by Dick Peebles.



WHR: Another civic club decided recently to shut their food booth down on the show grounds. This is a disturbing trend. Do you know why they chose to do this?

Inman: Yes it was disappointing to hear from the Civitan Club last month that not only were they discontinuing their booth after nearly five decades due to lack of active membership, but they were also disbanding their club for the same reason. They were so kind and appreciative for their relationship with the Celebration but they just can't get the manpower even to keep their club going.

Lack of being able to attract new members to work the booths and operate the clubs is the same reason we have lost three clubs in three years. Sales were up again in all booths last year but the clubs simply are struggling to find volunteers to work. Some have had to resort to hiring people since they don't have enough club members to do the job. It is a shame since this is the sole fundraiser for the majority of clubs, yet it is harder and harder for them to take advantage of the opportunity.

The Celebration is looking at several options including civic clubs from outside of Shelbyville (but in the county) that may have interest, renting space to private or chain restaurants which we have declined to do in the past, or using the Celebration concession staff to ensure our customers will have plenty of choices and good service. We are in the research stage at the present time.

WHR: What are your overall thoughts on the judging panel and can you let our readers know the factors considered in selecting this panel? How much are judges paid to judge this event?

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Inman: The board is very excited about our panel of judges for 2017. The search is very detailed and extensive. First, we look for an ensemble that brings a high level of quality to the table because the group selected will be judging the largest, most competitive horse show in the country.

We start by collecting a list of all AAA judges that desire to be considered for the position. From there the board seeks input and thought from people active in the industry on the collection of candidates. We also evaluate the candidates' history within the industry and geography, in terms of what region of the country does most of their experience lie? Knowledge of all of the disciplines from halter, to flat shod, to padded performance (is considered). Experience at larger events, including past Celebrations, adjudicating Tunica or the Fun Show, are particularly helpful in that not only is the quality of horses very high, but those have also been an opportunity to work with the Celebration team.

What people don't always notice is that behind those five judges are another 20 people making sure things runs quickly and smoothly in center ring. Every role is critical and a judge must mesh well within that system. Again, being a celebration judge is an experience and responsibility like no other

so earlier testing and preparation will prove invaluable in the big oval.

All the above are part of the process with again quality being the key. People often ask why do judges participate multiple years and the answer is two- fold. One, all your major sporting events, Super Bowl, Final Four, World Series, will have repeat officials that have earned the right to be there due to competency in action and secondly having more experienced officials teamed with newer people is the best way to transition in newer faces in order to broaden the pool of experience while insuring quality. There is that word again, quality.

Truly much is expected from these people. It is both physically and mentally stressful to handle 16 sessions in 11 days with this incredible level of competition. To a person I am always told that the mental toughness is, at the end of the day, the most valuable tool to own. I do often get asked "exactly what does a Celebration judge make?" Each judge earns \$15,000 and earn every penny is an accurate description.

WHR: What improvements have been made this year to the show grounds?

Inman: As far as facility improvements we are in the process of converting the Calsonic to LED lighting which should brighten the arena by 700 percent. We are also updating the restrooms and the climate controls to run more efficiently. This is an effort that will cost over \$170,000 but obviously benefit our customers tremendously and reduce our energy costs moving forward.

WHR: Has the Celebration ever considered allowing reserve victory passes and are you a fan of this practice, which is done at a select few of industry shows?

Inman: Now that is a question with multiple answers. First, yes we have considered reserve victory passes and yes I was a fan of it when I was showing if I got reserve! Seriously, the drawback is that, if done right, each reserve victory pass will add about six minutes to the class because you must have a presentation with it. That would mean another hour to an hour and a half to each session extending our evening performances to near or beyond midnight each night and that defeats the purpose of trying to get done at a more reasonable hour we discussed earlier.

WHR: It seems like more and a greater variety of events are coming to the show grounds. Can you highlight some of the more popular events that have rented the facility and what is being done to attract these types of events?

Inman: Absolutely. The Calsonic is a tremendous asset that, although very expensive to maintain, gives Shelbyville such a benefit as an entertainment and civic value venue. In the last 12 months we have been able to book more events than ever before. Some of the new events include indoor travel league girls fast pitch softball, Hispanic rodeo and music festivals, a real circus complete with elephants, over 12 days of rodeo and regional barrel racing, multiple new horse shows, concerts, flat track motorcycle racing, job fairs, and Kubota regional training.

However, my favorite event is the Celebration Christmas that we started in December 2015. It is a one day festival that takes nearly 10 days to prepare for. We convert the Calsonic into a winter wonderland with nearly 100 fresh cut trees and stage featuring six of our local church choirs performing, a petting zoo, pony rides, train rides on the Polar Express highlighted by coming through a tunnel under falling snow, Bedford County firetruck with a 40-foot extension ladder and 8 foot long candy canes hanging from it, and over 35 vendors. We have been very fortunate that Santa Claus

has found the time to stop by each year for free professional photographs with kids. It is all a free giveback from the Celebration family and friends to our community. We had over 2,500 kids and parents attend last year. Trust me though, without the big show just before Labor Day none of this would be possible.

What are we doing to promote our venue more? Hard work. We are teaming with our promoters to ensure that their experience is a positive and professional one. Showing we are not just a walking horse facility and aggressively discussing and delivering on our versatility. We also have committed a website just to the Calsonic Arena in an effort to promote this venue as its own brand. Of course the biggest plus are the people who work here and are willing to help make these opportunities happen.

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WHR: The corporate sponsor program at the Celebration is a big part of being able to afford the overhead of maintaining the facility and conducting the horse show. How is this program going and do you see this as an area of growth for the Celebration?

Inman: Sponsorship is probably the most critical component to the show and our facility in terms of revenue and we are so very thankful to our sponsors. (It's) always a challenge no doubt, especially as some of our sponsors are becoming less active than in years past. However, I am seeing the enthusiasm for where the industry is headed helping to create new sponsor partners or encouraging folks that have been gone for a while to come back.

I hope this is a trend that will grow. What people sometimes forget is that there are many sponsorship levels other than what is featured on our marques and in the Blue Ribbon. Opportunities start as low as \$75 for a morning trophy sponsor. We have ribbons, trophy, floral horse shoe, and classes that are extremely affordable. All are important and a way for everyone to help make the greatest horse show in the country a success. I urge anyone interested to call myself or Connie Allen at our office at 931-684-8915 and join us.

WHR: Anything else you'd like to share?

Inman: What I'd like to share is that the enthusiasm I am seeing and feeling this year is at the highest level I have witnessed in the five years I have been in this position. Prices of horses are up, and participation at shows by exhibitors and trainers is very positive. Our Fun Show had the largest number of entries in four years this past May. I am totally convinced we will see a strong increase in entries this year at the Celebration.

Last year we were up 20 percent over 2015 and I am confident we will easily exceed that number this year. Further, I think with the new class schedule coupled with the increase in entries, I am expecting to see World Grand Championship classes unlike what we have seen in a decade. I could not be more excited and appreciative. Please come be a part of the magic of, the 2017 Tennessee Walking Horse National Celebration.