

# the show goes on

The National Horse Show has become a fixture in Lexington after its storied history at Madison Square Garden

By Alexandra Beckstett

**t**here's something thrilling about standing center ring against a Bluegrass panorama, medal draped around your neck, after winning a class at the National Horse Show. It's the pinnacle of competition in the hunter/jumper world, a weeklong event that requires year-round work to qualify.

The face of the National, however, has evolved significantly throughout its storied 136-year history. Once the springboard of the fall social season in New York City, it moved from its longtime residence at Madison Square Garden in 2002. After relocating to the Kentucky Horse Park's Alltech Arena in 2010, the October show has maintained its polish and prestige while putting down Bluegrass roots.



SHAWN MCNILLLEN

Riley Newsome and Dakar VDL topped their classes in 2018.



the show goes on



Show president Jennifer Burger and Mason Phelps, its chairman, both say Lexington and the Kentucky Horse Park checked all the right boxes as a new home for the event.

SHAWN MCWILLIEN

## A timeless event

The National Horse Show has long been as much a social affair as an equestrian competition. Four years after a group of wealthy New York sportsmen founded the show at the original Madison Square Garden in 1883, its 920-member directory served as the foundation of the city's first Social Register. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the local press prominently featured the event's high fashion, celebrity guests, and, of course, horses. Equine motifs filled shop windows down Fifth Avenue.

Over the decades, the National moved with the Garden to each of its four locations, drawing international fields of competitors and launching a variety of championship events, from the Maclay National Horsemanship Championship for junior riders to the hallmark FEI World Cup Qualifier Grand Prix. Winners read like a who's who of legendary horses and riders: Rodney Jenkins and Idle Dice, Bernie Traurig and Jet Run, Greg Best and Gem Twist.

In that time, the National cemented its place as the premier "indoor" show on the fall hunter/jumper circuit. By 2002, however, it had become unfeasible and too expensive to host a horse show at the Garden. The show shuttled among venues in New York, New Jersey, and Florida before then-president Mason Phelps made a fortuitous visit to the Alltech Arena in 2010.

"At that time, we were at death's door, to be perfectly honest," said Phelps, who has served on National Horse Show committees since the '60s and is now the chairman of the board.

He happened to be in Lexington scouting a location for a fundraising event in the lead up to the 2010 World Equestrian Games (WEG). After taking one look at the 5,500-seat Alltech Arena being built for the WEG, Phelps went to the Horse Park powers that be and within three days had signed a contract committing the National Horse Show to move to Kentucky.

John Nicholson, Kentucky Horse Park executive director at the time, got Phelps an audience with WEG sponsor Alltech, which signed on for three years as the National's title sponsor, and "we were up and running," said Phelps.

Current National Horse Show president and long-time horse owner Jennifer Burger believes the National and the Horse Park are a natural fit. "I feel that the



RAYMOND WOOLFE JR.

Competitors wait at the in-gate in 1962 before the start of a hunt team class.



PC BUDD

Famous partnerships such as Rodney Jenkins and Idle Dice thrilled fans at the "Garden."

National Horse Show is one of the country's greatest, most honorable events in the horse industry," she said. "It's tricky to find a facility that's capable of hosting an event like that. The Kentucky Horse Park provides us with the Alltech Arena, the appropriate stage."

Highly respected trainer and judge Ralph Caristo, who has attended the National Horse Show with his wife, Holly, as both an exhibitor and a judge since the 1960s, said the current venue has a similarly classy style as the Garden but with a different feel.

"It was always exciting to have a horse show at Madison Square Garden," he said, "but in those days we'd have to get up at 2 a.m. to get our horses in and up to the fifth floor."

At the Kentucky Horse Park, the facilities have been designed with horses, not hockey rinks or basketball courts, in mind. The barn stalls are permanent instead of temporarily erected in the underbelly of a sports venue. Riders have acres of open space at hand rather than navigating flights of ramps. And the host city is centrally located.

"Geographically, it's appealing," said Burger. "The city is wonderful, and there are nice hotels and restaurants. You can fly in comfortably and easily, and you can drive in comfortably and easily."

"All of these things factored into why it worked so well for us," Phelps added.

## Finding a foothold

Entering its ninth year in Lexington, the National Horse Show has regained its rhythm and continues to mature. It has expanded from six days to nine, kicking off with three days of local classes for riders who don't qualify for the main event "but want to come show with all the pomp and circumstance that the National Horse Show brings with it — the trophies and the red carpet, all of that," said Phelps.

Specialty classes, such as a Saddlebred division, a Puissance high jump, and evening rodeos, have rotated in and out. But the

National's hallmark events remain the ones that have drawn packed crowds and the equestrian elite for more than a century.

Saturday evening features the \$250,000 Longines FEI World Cup Grand Prix, the richest of only 14 events in the United States that qualify riders for the show jumping World Cup finals. Burger calls it the National's "crown jewel," attracting Olympic-level riders and their best horses from around the world. It's coupled with the ever-popular Barn Night, where local barns and clubs receive complimentary tickets and a chance to compete for prizes.

"So, at a high-end event like that, with the best the country can produce, we also incorporate local people to come and enjoy the evening," said Burger. "That's a big night."

Sunday spotlights junior riders in the esteemed ASPCA Maclay Championship, a horsemanship class dating back to 1933 that fea-



COURTESY OF KENTUCKY HORSE PARK

The National Horse Show moved to the Kentucky Horse Park in 2010.





Beezie Madden and Chic Hin D Hyrencourt win a Grand Prix class in 2018.

tures nearly 200 top young equestrians who have qualified from coast to coast. Winners of the event have gone on to become some of the greatest talents in the sport.

Gifted young professional Victoria Colvin, from Wellington, Florida, took home the Maclay title in 2014. "Winning the Maclay at the National Horse Show was one of the highlights of my riding career and really set me on the path for success as an equestrian," she said. "Following that championship, I found myself with more competitive opportunities in and out of the ring that helped me grow in my skills and ultimately set the foundation for my future business."

Since coming to Kentucky, the National has gained three more equitation championships, in addition to the Maclay, for riders of various ages and levels. And in 2018 it added a \$50,000 Hunter Classic, open to professionals, juniors, and amateurs who have performed exceptionally throughout the week's hunter classes, to its roster of evening events. Inaugural winner Scott Stewart noted that the excitement and atmosphere surrounding the classic were reminiscent of the champions class held back at the Garden.

As a part of its natural evolution, however, the National has gradually departed from its renown as a weeklong social event. Today, the spotlight is on the sport and the culture surrounding it.

"In the New York days the show was in the middle of the city's social season," Phelps explained. "We've kind of outgrown that."

For the first few years in Lexington, the organizers



Sam Walker and Waldo triumph in the 2018 ASPCA Maclay Final.

hosted a party on-site each night after the show concluded.

"It was great, but at 10 o'clock at night, people have to get in their cars and drive home and ride the next day," said Phelps.

So last year they cut the social evening events to one before the \$135,000 Jumper Classic on Thursday and an enormously popular celebration Saturday night at the nearby Marriott Griffin Gate Resort.

"The majority of our guests stay at the Griffin Gate, so we thought it was a good partnership to have things there where people are in close proximity to where they're going to be sleeping that night," Burger said.

## Community connections

The National Horse Show has developed a positive partnership with the Lexington community. With it comes business for the area; in return local companies have stepped up to help support the show.

Audi of Lexington, for instance, awards a one-year lease on an Audi to the winners of the Hunter Classic as well as the FEI Grand Prix. High-end food and merchandise vendors set up in the Maxwell Place exhibition hall. The Kentucky Horse Park stores and displays the National's collection of historic trophies in its vault.

Lexington also offers unique activities for equestrians visiting from





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around the country and world. "There's so much to do, especially if you're a horse head like most of us are," said Caristo. "Holly and I take tours of the Thoroughbred farms and visit different stallions. When we first started, all we had were Thoroughbreds, and they're still my first love."

The National hosts a charity night for area non-profits, offering cash prizes for the ones with the largest cheering sections. The show also offers deals and discounts to local horse groups.

"We're always committed to making it bigger and better; we're always trying to get more bodies in the seats,"

## NOTABLE EVENTS

- 1883: A group of influential New York sportsmen founded the National Horse Show, which was held at the original Madison Square Garden
- 1890: The National Horse Show moved to the second Madison Square Garden, located on Madison Square
- 1909: Alfred G. Vanderbilt, then president of the National Horse Show, made the show international by inviting British Cavalry officers to compete
- 1915: Eleanora Sears became the first woman to ride astride at the National
- 1926: The National moved to the third Madison Square Garden located on Eighth Avenue at 50th Street, where it would remain for 40 years
- 1933: The first National Horsemanship Championship for the ASPCA Alfred B. MacLay Trophy took place
- 1968: The competition moved to Madison Square Garden on 34th Street at Pennsylvania Station
- 1983: The National celebrated its centennial with a Carriage Marathon of more than 100 horse-drawn vehicles through Central Park and down Fifth Avenue to City Hall
- 1996: The famous Cigar, after earning nearly \$10 million on the racetrack, had his formal retirement ceremony at the National Horse Show. The Paulsons, who owned Cigar, also owned the winner of that year's grand prix, America I
- 2002: Show moved to Wellington, Florida
- 2008: Show moved to Syracuse, New York
- 2011: The National Horse Show's first year at the Kentucky Horse Park with Alltech Inc. as its title sponsor
- 2012: Olympic gold medalist McLain Ward won a record fifth National Horse Show Grand Prix
- 2015-16: Kent Farrington and his 2016 Olympic silver medal mount Voyer won back-to-back FEI Grand Prix
- 2018: Scott Stewart and Lucador won the inaugural \$50,000 Hunter Classic





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At Barn Night local barns and clubs compete for prizes and share in the fun.

## CLASSES

**Show Jumping:** Jumper classes showcase a horse's speed and athleticism. The horse and rider who knock down the fewest rails in the fastest amount of time win. Grand Prix-level fences can be upward of five feet tall.

**Show Hunters:** Modeled after traditional hunts, hunter classes showcase horses' style and manners over fences and across the ground. A judge determines the places based on how well each horse performs. Fences can reach heights of four feet.

**Equitation:** In equitation classes, riders — not the horses — are judged on their position, horsemanship, and ability to ride correctly and effectively.

said Phelps, who admitted the show's timing the weekend of the Breeders' Cup can pose a challenge in a community so ingrained in racing.

"[The National Horse Show] is such a wonderful event," said Burger. "I would love to invite more local people and organizations to come enjoy and be a part of it — to have fun with us."

It takes a special give-and-take relationship between an event and its venue for something the magnitude of the National to continue. And it appears the show has found that accord in Lexington.

"It's fine with me if it stays in Lexington for the rest of its life," said Caristo. "I love Lexington, and I love the way it's run there." **KM**

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