

Virginia Arabians compete at Commonwealth Park

By Galen McBride

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The Virginia Arabian Horse Association's annual A-rated show was held last weekend at Commonwealth Park in Culpeper.

Marie Taylor, VAHA president and show co-chairman, took stock of how the show and grounds had changed over the years. "We've been coming to Commonwealth Park for well over a decade," said Taylor, "and we've always been focused on making this an 'exhibitor-friendly show.' Entries are up in almost every division and HITS management (which owns and operates the show grounds) has really pulled out all the stops to upgrade the facilities.

"It takes a tremendous amount of coordination and cooperation to make a show this size go smoothly," Taylor continued. "This year, everything, from the weather to the judging to the fantastic new footing in the rings, came together to make it perfect experience."

Cathie McDonald, in years past the barn manager for the show, came onboard this year to co-chair the show with Taylor. "We've especially seen a tremendous growth in the sport horse division. We even added in hand sport horse futurity classes to the program, along with a new English trail class, and hunters over fences." New Breeders Sweepstakes classes were also added.

"There were more than 120 sport horse pleasure entries on Friday and about 60 rounds in the over fences classes, which I'm sure speaks well of our judging slate this year," McDonald went on. "Dressage entries were also up. These are very fast-growing segments of our breed shows nationwide."

Well-known Fredericksburg horsewoman Dana Gardner of Gardner Arabians judged the futurity and trail classes. Jackie Johnston, whose international and Arabian National experience makes her one of the most sought-after judges in the breed, officiated in the main ring, and open hunter judge Matt Collins passed on the sport horse in-hand and over-fences classes.

McDonald observed that the sport horse division had definitely affected the entire Arabian show scene.

"Exhibitors have learned a lot about showing in hunter classes especially," she said. "Just a few years ago, it was unusual for there to be true hunter-type Arabians in the classes, but now exhibitors understand what the hunter world is about and have reacted positively to it.

"Mr. Collins commented to me that the horses presented for him to judge were definitely hunter-type and 'in the frame,' and were turned out with braiding and equipment as proper hunters should be. Frankly, I think he was pleasantly surprised. And I believe the public is beginning to understand that there really are genuine, talented and competitive Arabian hunters."

The impact of the sport horse division is also being felt in the futurity classes. "Since the state of Virginia cut matching funds for futurity classes several years ago, entries have fallen," McDonald continued, "but an unanticipated consequence is the fact that sport horse breeders and exhibitors know that it takes longer for a sport horse foal to mature and develop physically for competition.

"Many Arabian sport horse family lines are not really ready for in-hand showing as yearlings and 2-year olds, so their owners are keeping them home to grow up. I think this is good for the breed as a whole, but it's drilling a hole in our futurity entries," said McDonald.

Around lunchtime on Saturday, traffic snarled on Route 522 due to a serious automobile accident near Coffee-wood, preventing many exhibitors from returning to the show grounds. The scheduled lunch break was extended to accommodate the riders.

During the break, judge Johnston praised the quality of the new footing in the two main rings and emphasized how important it was to exhibitors and their mounts. Using a combination of EuroFelt, stone dust, rubber shards and sand, the HITS facilities managers had completely upgraded the rings. Significant improvements and repairs had also been made to the barns, electrical systems and communications systems.

“We’ve been very pleased to welcome VAHA to our facility year after year,” said Jonathan Viola, the HITS on-site representative. “It’s been a great partnership and we want the showing community to know that we will continue working to upgrade the facilities here in order to provide them the best venue and showing experience possible.”

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