



DERBY *Days*

By Sally Floyd Kay

When we hear the word “derby,” many envision the crown jewel of horse racing, the Kentucky Derby. Recently, “derby” has embraced a new meaning, breathing fresh air and excitement into the hunter show arena.

The discipline of hunter show horses is deep-seated in steeplechasing and foxhunting. To rekindle this tradition in the show ring, both in the United States as well as abroad, The United States Hunter Jumper Association (USHJA) High Performance Hunter Committee developed the USHJA International Hunter Derby in 2008.

“Being a part of this event and witnessing its evolution has been a true honor,” offers USHJA High Performance Committee Chairman Ron Danta of Beaver River Farms in Camden, SC. “It’s

refreshing to see what this modern day industry can do when it works collaboratively to meet a common goal.”

During the past three years, the country’s leading horses and riders have competed over original “foxhunting” style courses in their respective regions, judged on style, brilliance and degree of handiness. The obstacles are set at a minimum of 3’6” in height with some having 3’9” to 4’ or 4’3” options showcasing the rider’s accuracy and horse’s athletic ability. Formal/dress attire is required for the riders. Buff breeches and shad belly, white breeches and dark or scarlet coat, hunt colors coat or official sponsor or team jacket are permitted.

The USHJA \$100,000 International Derby Finals, held at the Kentucky Horse Park three years

consecutively, begins with the country’s top 75 horses (based on prize money earned throughout the show year...minimum of \$1000 won) competing over a typical derby course. Most of the riders are professionals; however, amateurs and juniors have come on the scene and topped the ranks as well. Four judges, strategically placed around the show arena, subjectively assign each horse a numeric score, with bonus points for jumping the higher options. The top 25 return for a second round, called the classic round. The top twelve from that round return for a final time over the handy course. During this round there are bonus points added for degree of handiness in addition to the height options selected. Those horses’ order of go is based on the numerical score

awarded in the classic round (lowest to highest). The cumulative scores of the classic round/handy round determine the winners. Recipients of the prestigious International Derby Finals Champion title thus far include John French aboard Rumba in 2009; Hunt Tosh aboard Lone Star in 2010; and Lillie Keenan aboard C Coast Z in 2011 (Lillie is only fourteen years old)!

“This class has certainly created a sense of excitement for both competitors and spectators,” comments derby veteran Liza Towell Boyd of Finally Farm in Camden, SC. Boyd has piloted her mount Brunello (co-owned by Janet Peterson) to numerous International Derby wins in the Southeast as well as finishing 3rd in the 2010 Derby Finals.

USC student Sarah Ward is one of the few amateur riders competing in the International Derby Series. “Competing in derbies has been an entirely new experience for me and has really given my horse Onassis aka ‘Tyler’ something to be excited about! The courses are always so much fun and challenging.” Sarah admits that competing against professionals is hard, but it also helps her learn so much. “While it can

be a very humbling experience, it can also be very rewarding.”

International Derby horses, mostly European Warmbloods and a few Thoroughbreds, are in a class of their own. Perhaps it's the sparkle in their eye, or the extra spring in their step as they enter the ring. Whatever the case, these horses all have the heart to jump formidable obstacles confidently. “I think Tyler enjoys the derbies so much because the courses are much more interesting and the jumps are built a little bigger which really gets him to jump high and beautiful,” adds Sarah. “He loves the challenges, like the banks and high options.”

The growing popularity of the International Hunter Derby Program encouraged USHJA to develop a separate series of competitions modeled after the Derby but tailored to accommodate less seasoned riders and/or horses. The National Hunter Classic Program was launched last year at both “AA” and “A” rated shows in an effort to provide both horse and rider a conduit through which to gain experience with a lower fence height and difficulty level.

The South Carolina Hunter Jumper Association's (SCHJA) inaugural Hunter Derby Series



Sarah Ward on Onassis

and its Finals, sponsored by The Tack Room, will be held during the SCHJA Palmetto Finals Horse Show on December 3, 2011 at the South Carolina Equine Park (SCEP) in Camden, SC. These invited competitors have had the chance to show at five different derbies throughout the Carolinas during the 2010-2011 show season, most of which have been directed by Progressive Show Jumping, Inc (PSJ) in Aiken, SC. Its owners Cathy and Rick Cram have man-

aged many derbies of all levels at various show facilities in the Southeast. “It's clear the Derbies are a favorite among the exhibitors,” affirms Cathy. “Whether they are international, national or local, people come out and support, ride and watch the event. A testament to its popularity is PSJ having 32 starters at a Local Derby in the heat of the summer in August and 38 starters at our Spring International Derby. Having the same type of Derby every week would ruin

the excitement, and mixing it up is very important. We have a successful International, National and Local series; therefore, we are implementing a 2'6” non-pro Hunter Derby series for 2012. We will host about four or five in the coming year and have a 2'6” Derby Finals next October at Highfields in Aiken, SC.”

For further information on the various levels of hunter derby competitions, visit www.usef.org; ushja.org; schja.org and psjshows.com

left to right - Bill Maroney (USHJA President), Danny Robertshaw - commentator, Ron Danta (USHJA HPH Committee Chairman), Shawna Dietrich - Dietrich and Company (presentation sponsor) and Hugh Kincannon - Competition Manager, Lillie Keenan is on C Coast Z



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