



The Aiken Horse Show

Horses, History and the Hitchcock Woods

By PAM GLEASON, PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARY KNOLL

Perhaps there is no tradition more deeply rooted in Aiken's equestrian history than the annual Aiken Horse Show in the Woods. Mrs. Hitchcock established the show in 1916 as a place to showcase the horses of Aiken's Winter Colony. It was very successful and instantly became an annual affair. Not only was it an equestrian competition, it also became an important social event, and was as well known as a place to gather and enjoy an elaborate picnic under the trees as it was a place to show horses. Long wooden tables were laid under the pines and covered with white table cloths, meals were served on fine china and crystal, and spectators were attended by private butlers and wait staff.

The classes at the shows reflected the makeup of Aiken's equestrian community. The first shows featured in hand classes for polo ponies and

unbroken colts, as well as classes for child riders, for hunter pairs, for qualified hunters and for steeplechase hunters. The last class of the day was always the most interesting. There were four jumps set in the ring, and the contestants had to jump a course over them twice. "No horseman was needed to judge the class, merely an expert timer," wrote Jimmy Cooley for *The Aiken Bulletin* in 1933. "For speed was the first and last consideration, and the only thing that counted was the time elapsed." According to Cooley, this was a class that "could not possibly have been on any programme except in that little forest encircled ring in Aiken."

As time went on, the classlist evolved. Mrs. Hitchcock added lead line



classes for small children, in which all contestants got a ribbon. In the next division, for children mounted on ponies of 13 hands and under, there were no consolation ribbons “so as soon as children graduate from the lead-rein they begin to learn to be good losers,” wrote Mrs. Hitchcock. Classes for older children grew so large it took all morning to finish them. Family classes were instituted and became quite competitive —the Hitchcocks often won, mounted on their trademark chestnut Thoroughbreds. The polo pony classes grew so large that for a time, they were removed from this show and had to have their own show.



Some years, the horse show was so big, it started as early as Tuesday, and people referred to “horse show week” in Aiken.

The little show in the woods became famous. By the mid 1920s, the *New York Times* had started covering it. According to the *Times*, in 1927, there were 500 horses at the show and 1,000 spectators. The following year, the *Times* reported 800 horses and 2,000 spectators. In 1930, the *Times* reported that the first day of the show was entirely devoted to one jumping class that had 64 competitors and that there were 3,500 spectators. It seems likely that these figures are at least somewhat inflated. However, it is clear that the show was extremely popular, bringing competitors and spectators from near and far. It was the one time that motor cars were allowed in the woods, and ringside parking spaces were sold, raising money for various causes. “It is surprising to see the variety of number plates from far, far away,” wrote Harry Worcester Smith in his book *Life and Sport in Aiken* (Derrydale Press, 1935.)

The Show in 2011

Today, the Aiken Horse Show in the Woods carries on the traditions started by Mrs. Hitchcock in 1916. A great deal has changed in the 95 years since these traditions started, but the ring itself has stayed substantially the same. In the fall, it is always seeded with rye grass, so



that by the time of the show it is an oasis of emerald green, surrounded by tall, dark pines. Spectators still come to have their gourmet lunches under the ringside tent, and the event is still one of the social highlights of the season.

The classlist has evolved over the years, although it retains many features of an old fashioned hunter show that are hard to come by these days. There is still a family class, a class for hunter pairs and for hunt teams. Leadline classes and hunter classes for children are still a feature, as are a variety of classes for members of the local hunts. The polo pony classes and other in-hand classes are gone, however, as is that exciting final class of the day in which competitors jumped against the clock.

Some of the more recently introduced classes hark back to older times. A few years ago, members of Aiken Ladies Aside, Aiken’s side saddle club, introduced

a side saddle class. That class has now become a whole division. This year, the sidesaddle division, which has previously been held first thing in the morning, will be held later in the day so that side saddle riders from Camden can compete. The gentleman’s hack class, introduced last year, was quite popular and will be repeated. According to Linda Knox McLean, who is



the co-chair of the show with Gail King, the family class might also be bigger this year.

“We’ve expanded the definition of a family,” she says. “Now you can have step cousins and other, more distant relatives. It’s great to see more families out there, carrying on the tradition, and we’d like to encourage participation.”

Another change this year is that instead of a luncheon on Saturday there will be a breakfast. This is because this year the horse show coincides with the Pacer’s and Polo match on Powderhouse Field, which is the third leg of the Aiken Triple Crown.

“We’d like people who are going to polo to come to the horse show in the morning,” says Linda. “They can come here, have breakfast and enjoy the show, then carry on and go to polo in the afternoon.”

The Judge

The judge of this year’s show is Paul D. Cronin, who was the director of the riding program and the head instructor at Sweet Briar College in Virginia for 34 years. Sweet Briar College is a private liberal arts college for women founded in 1901 with a well-known and highly respected riding program. A number of members of the Aiken equestrian community attended Sweet Briar. Those who rode with Mr. Cronin remember him with a respect that borders upon awe.

There is little wonder. Mr. Cronin is one of the most distinguished old-school horsemen in America. He has had a long and successful equestrian career, training with Captain Vladimir Stanislavovitch Littauer (1892 -1989) for more than 30 years. Captain Littauer,



who was a cavalry officer in Imperial Russia, was an early advocate of the forward seat, at the time a controversial school of riding. He came to America as a refugee after the Russian Revolution and eventually founded a riding school and wrote over a dozen books on horsemanship. In addition to Paul Cronin, his well-known students included Jane Marshall Dillon, Bernie Traurig, Diana Rankin and Walter Kees. Paul Cronin went on to win many prestigious awards from the United States Equestrian Federation and the United States Hunter Jumper Association.

“We’ve been wanting to have him judge the show for years,” says Linda McLean. “He’s known to virtually all the Sweet Briar alumni in Aiken, and he’s much beloved by his former students. I know he’s looking forward to coming down to Aiken, because he has many old friends here. It’s going to be like old home week for him.”

Linda notes that none of his former students will be riding in the show themselves, but at least two will have their young children in the ring. “They’re both so thrilled to be able to show off their children to him,” she adds. “They are so excited about him coming to Aiken.”

Mr. Cronin’s accomplishments also include writing a well-reviewed book called *Schooling and Riding the Sport Horse: A Modern American Hunter/Jumper System*. The book is available on Amazon – those who wonder what the judge will be looking for at the show just have to buy the book!

The Foxhunter Champion

One of the unique aspects of the Aiken Horse Show is the Foxhunter division. In order to be eligible to compete in this division, riders must present a certificate from a Master of Foxhounds that they have actually gone out and hunted the horse that they are riding at least six times

during the season. This division is, perhaps, the most hotly contested of the show. The winner of the Foxhunter Championship takes home the Arden Park Memorial Trophy and is honored each year on the cover of the next year’s horse show program as well as on the cover of *The Aiken Horse*.

Last year’s Foxhunter Champion was Ann Wicander riding her horse Wow. Ann, who lives and rides in Aiken during the winter months, spends the warm season in New Hampshire where she is the joint Master of the Wentworth Hunt. Wow is an 11-year-old Hanoverian mare who is both a foxhunter and an eventer; Ann currently competes her at the Preliminary level.

Although they were the champions last year, Ann says that she and Wow will not be in the ring this year, leaving the field open for the next contender.



Practical Information

- This year’s horse show runs from Friday, April 1, until Sunday, April 3. As usual, there will be a welcoming party at the show grounds on Thursday evening. Classlists and entry forms are available online at www.aikenhorseshow.org, or at tack stores around town.
- Those who plan to come to the hunt breakfast on Saturday and/or the luncheon on Sunday, those wishing to purchase ringside parking and those who are interesting in sponsorship opportunities should call the Hitchcock Woods Foundation office at 803-642-0528.
- Although cars are allowed in the woods on horse show day, trucks and trailers are not. Competitors park at the Stable on the Woods entrance and hack into the show. During the days of the show, Linda Knox McLean and Jenne Stoker will be at the ring this year with their cell phones, and they encourage participants to check in with them to find out how the class schedule is progressing so that they don’t find themselves rushing to the ring and then waiting for their class to start, or, worse, hacking in calmly only to find that their class is already over when they get there. (Linda Knox McLean 803.646.7111 or Jenne Stoker 803.270.7331.)
- The Aiken Horse Show is the signature event of the Hitchcock Woods Foundation, which was created to “protect and preserve the Hitchcock Woods in a natural and ecologically healthy state; maintain and manage historic and traditional equestrian and pedestrian uses, and foster education and research on the history and resources of the Woods.” Every year the show raises funds for the foundation so that it can carry out this mission. If you would like to make a donation to the foundation, or become a Friend of the Woods, please visit www.HitchcockWoods.org.

