

# Sonoma Horse Park

## Big plans for sophomore season of popular hunter/jumper shows

Hunter/jumper enthusiasts were already knocked out by the debut of the Sonoma Horse Park's USEF-rated show series last year. Great footing, generous prize money for pros and amateurs alike and a "what can we do for you?" attitude from management toward exhibitors, sponsors and fans were hallmarks of the venue's six-show roll out.

The inaugural season was a hard act to follow, but the Horse Park's manager Ashley Herman Griffin is bound and determined to do it. So much so that she spent a month of the fall working at two of Europe's biggest jumping competitions: the Audi Masters in Brussels and the Gucci Masters in Paris. Both are staged by two of the international sport's key players, Nelson Pessoa and Christophe Ameeuw. Nelson, of course, is a legendary horseman and father to top jumper Rodrigo Pessoa. Christophe travels in the same elite sport circles as a horse dealer and show manager.

Both shows are truly extravaganzas, Ashley reports. She ran the VIP area for both events to participate and observe and to borrow ideas that can be applied back home. Coverage of both competitions was carried live in 187

countries, Ashley reports, and the revenue from that makes their budget vastly larger than what is feasible in North America. Nonetheless, as a young equestrian event promoter, Ashley enjoyed common ground with these "pioneers of the sport" when it came to their mission. "They want to promote the sport to the masses," she relays. Their success, and that of their colleagues throughout Europe, leads to scenarios like the one she encountered while riding in a Belgian taxi cab from the airport. "I told the driver where I was going and he knew all about the show," she relays. "He had tickets for that Sunday night."

Creating a luxurious experience for all involved and helping make celebrities of riders and horses are among the many inspirations Ashley flew home with. "If you look at the heart of what they are doing, there's no reason it can't be done here. Now that we have built our facility, I want to focus on some of these details of presentation, promotion of riders and the quality of the experience for everybody."

### Essential Sponsorships

Things are off to a good start. Saddle maker Antares Sellier France has already stepped up to put its highly respected name on the elegant VIP area atop the berm between the Grand Prix and Main Hunter arenas.

"I am particularly excited about the Antares VIP Berm," says Ashley. "Antares Sellier France

is the industry leader in quality, innovation and excellence, and the VIP Berm will be no exception. The Antares VIP Berm will be outfitted with lavish cabanas and teak VIP tables, serviced by Sonoma's most celebrated caterer and featuring Sonoma's finest wines. We are partnering with Antares Sellier France to offer the most luxurious VIP on the West Coast." Already a lovely place during the debut season, the VIP Berm has been further dressed up with a permanent cover and beautiful landscaping.

Soliciting, promoting and marketing sponsors are among Ashley's biggest priorities. "Sponsorship is an essential component of Sonoma Horse Park. They allow us to continue to offer more prize money, better awards, more exhibitor events and a superior horse show environment. Sponsorship is vital to the growth and promotion of this sport and it allows us to create a better experience for the exhibitors.

"Companies including Grand Meadows, Circle Oak Equine, Ariat, County Saddlery, Classic Equine Equipment, Carousel Investments, Antares Sellier, Morinda Care and California Riding Magazine (to name a few) allow us to push the envelope and set a higher standard for our horse shows," Ashley continues. "Last year we were able to attract many great sponsors because we made a commitment to them that we would showcase their product as if it were our own. Every company has different needs and marketing strategies, so we take a lot of time to understand who they are, what their goals are and how Sonoma Horse Park can help promote their brand. My team and I work very hard for our sponsors because they are a key factor in not only how much prize money we can offer but also how innovative and dynamic our horse shows can be for the exhibitors. Our

commitment to our sponsors has proven to be very effective. A perfect example is Morinda Care; they came on as a sponsor early last season and had such a successful response from our horse shows, they returned later in the season with a larger sponsorship. That was a wonderful affirmation!"

The Classic Equine Equipment Winners Circle is another new feature. With Classic Equine's beautiful stalls as a backdrop, the area





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will give exhibitors a fantastic background for their win shots and presentations. Other new additions to the 2011 show season include a new Grand Prix warm-up arena with the beloved European footing and extensive landscaping throughout the show facility.

### Giving Back

Much of the SHP Series' budget is earmarked to get back into exhibitors' pockets. Responding to feedback from last year's shows, elicited in an extensive survey, the Series will continue to increase prize purses across the board. "In particular, we'll offer more in the Open divisions," Ashley notes. "There are a lot of trainers and individuals competing in the lower jumper divisions and it's a priority to put money into Classics and Stakes for them. I know how much it costs to show and there should always be an opportunity to earn your entries back." She hopes to offer \$2,500 to \$5,000 prize purses in these division's big classes.

The highlight of each show's Friday Fun Day will be a special class unique to that week's competition. The idea builds on the popularity of the Ride & Drive competition held during last year's circuit gem, the Giant Steps Charity Classic. Sponsored by Ultra Motors, the Ride & Drive featured teams of one horse rider and

one Vespa rider, the latter of whom was often a parent, groom or another unsung hero of the sport. The classes generated lots of excitement and fun for fans and participants, and Vespa sponsored two Ultra Motor A2Bs, that were awarded to the winning team.

Again building upon great ideas tested last year, the SHP Series will feature the region's finest wines, cheeses, olive oils and other gourmet goodies. The venue's active farmer's market offers everything from between-class snacks or take-home meals to high-end gifts for horses, riders and family members.

"We are very excited about the quality of vendors that come to Sonoma Horse Park," Ashley notes. "We limit the amount of vendors so that each offers something unique. In 2011 we will have some fantastic new artists and jewelry designers joining us during the season. We are also thrilled that Jesse Holycross and his company Italian Equestrian will travel again from Southern California to our summer shows. Other fabulous vendors such as DKT Saddlery, Brown Beauty, Braly Woodworking, Stella & Dot and Sonoma Horse Park's own The Equestrian's Concierge will exhibit throughout the show season. We employ a vendor coordinator to keep things running smoothly for both the shoppers and the vendors. With so many horse shows to choose from it's

important that the vendors realize we support them along with our sponsors and exhibitors."

Many of the vendors' offerings have natural tie-ins to the Horse Park's Sonoma location. It's just 35 minutes from San Francisco in a vacation destination full of the best in food, wine, restaurants, hotels and golf courses. The 40-acre show property even offers the surprising backdrop of sailboats cruising by on the Petaluma River that helps keep the venue cool through the summer.

This year's agenda features seven hunter/jumper shows, beginning with the HMI Equestrian Challenge May 18-22 and wrapping up September 14-18 with the Strides & Tides, two of the Series' five USEF A-rated competitions. The peak of the season will take place with the AA-rated HMI Equestrian Classic, July 26-31, followed immediately by the Giant Steps Charity Classic. Veteran show management firm, Sally Hudson's Headlands Management, returns to manage the competitions.



For more information on the Sonoma Horse Park Series, visit [www.sonomahorsepark.com](http://www.sonomahorsepark.com) or call Ashley Herman Griffin at 415-518-2145.

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