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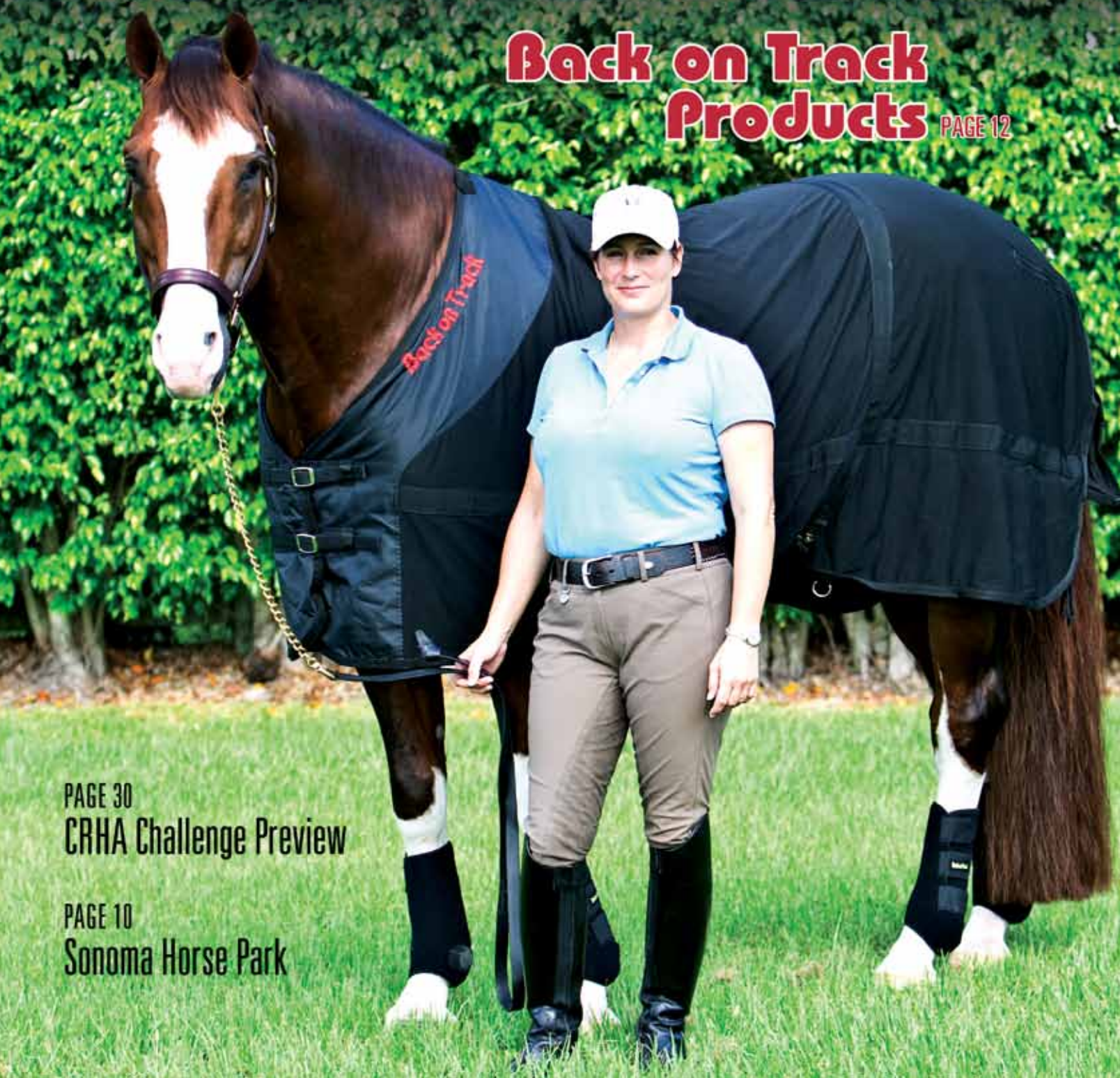
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The Gallop:

Sonoma Horse Park ends first rated season on a high note.

by Kim F. Miller

Lisé Quintero won the Sonoma Horse Park's season finale, the \$25,000 Strides & Tides Grand Prix, on Sept. 18. The biggest winner, however, was the equestrian community as a whole as the Horse Park's inaugural season of rated hunter/jumper shows came to a close. What Ashley Herman and her team pulled off is remarkable under any circumstances and all the more so in today's persistently tough economy.

It was Herman's intent from the outset to create a competition series that worked for all involved: exhibitors and their families, sponsors, vendors and spectators. During a day spent at the Horse Park, located in Sonoma County's Petaluma, it was clear she had succeeded on all counts.

With fans lining the berm that separates the big and beautifully-footed Grand Prix arena from the peaceful Petaluma River, the setting for this big class sponsored by Classic Equine was ideal. The weather was warm with a hint of fall in the brisk breeze. Exhibitors and fans alike enjoyed things not often seen at a horse show: oyster platters and olive oil and wine tastings in the Farmer's Market area that doubled during this show as a silent auction fundraiser for the Giant Steps Riding Program.

The Kingsland VIP tent situated between the Grand Prix and main hunter arenas was packed

with enthusiastic fans who followed the action while enjoying delicious pasta dinner and plenty of wine. The sense of community and fun was palpable and irresistible as the crowd cheered for each rider and several contenders stopped by the rail to acknowledge and interact with the fans.

The festive atmosphere that materialized was exactly what Herman had in mind from the get-go. "There are a lot of ways to put on an amazing show," she comments. "One of our priorities was to make our shows more of a celebration." Wine and music added to a relaxed, party atmosphere that Herman considers essential, especially on Saturday nights, because it enhances the general appeal of the show and the exhibitor's experience. From a fan gathering standpoint, Herman knows the SHP strategy is paying off when her phone rings like crazy with previously non-horsey people asking when the Grand Prix starts during show weeks. Crowds have grown at each of the SHP Series' marquee events. As a former top junior rider, Herman knows the money, time and hard work that go into being a competitor. "We want our shows to reflect some of the joy and fun that goes into the sport."

Course designer Peter Brandt of Canada plotted a tough course that drew no clear rounds and generated a jump-off among four four-faulters. A

four-in-a row line heading right into the VIP tent seemed particularly ominous, but the faults were spread fairly evenly throughout the course.

Based at the Riverside Equestrian Center that is adjacent to the Sonoma Horse Park, Lisé Quintero and fellow Bay Area veterans Peter Breakwell and Macella O'Neill, plus newer arrival Chelsea Jones, advanced to the jump-off. Breakwell had even more on his mind than a piece of the \$25,000 class prize. He stood to win the CWD Grand Prix Circuit Challenge award, a 2G1 saddle that retails for \$6,000-plus, had they won the class. But, riding last in the jump-off, Quintero and Cupido matched Breakwell and O'Neill's clear rounds and beat their time to win. Jones finished fourth. The CWD Award for most money earned in the Open Jumper divisions went to Mandy Porter. A Northern California native, Porter has been based in Southern California for several years but spent two weeks at the Sonoma Horse Park for the HMI Equestrian Classic in late July and the Giant Steps Charity Show that followed. Porter's win in the \$30,000 Classic Grand Prix, sponsored by Grand Meadows, secured her victory of the special saddle. She was not there to get the goods, but her boyfriend and fellow jumper rider Craig Starr happily stood in after finishing seventh in the class.

CWD sponsored two other circuit awards. Marion Nelson's student Dana Schmidt won the Amateur Jumper award, a Classic Custom saddle. And, Sonoma Valley Farms trainer Hope Glynn won the Professional Hunter Challenge and \$1,500 of CWD tack.

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Good Report Card

September's Strides & Tides was a report card for the Sonoma Horse Park. As the final show of the venue's first season of rated hunter/jumper competitions, it was the event in which all stakeholders would participate based on their experience with SHP in the shows that came before. "It was our first chance to see the will of the people," says Herman. With 400-plus exhibitors, a busy vendor's village and signs of sponsorship everywhere, "it was very promising," Herman reports.

But nobody is resting on their laurels. "Next year will be the real test," Herman relays. "People will have had a chance to think about where they want to compete. These days, there is an A show every weekend. It's great because it puts the ball, finally, in the exhibitor's hands. It's forcing the managers to step up their games, myself included, to make a better product, offer more money, be more customer service oriented. And that's all great because it is going to make the sport better."

"It's been a massive learning curve," Herman notes. Familiar start-up problems, most notably footing, were solved by the season's third show and from then on positive responses built upon each other, culminating in a great turn out for the season finale. "I think we had some people who were not originally planning to attend the last show decide to come out and support it because they liked what we were doing."

An informal poll on the show grounds and in the VIP tent Saturday night indicates that what Herman and her team are doing is a great job of catering to each client's needs. Footing issues early in the circuit were immediately addressed and sponsors' and vendors' marketing goals were carefully catered to.

Along with Sally Hudson as competition manager, Herman anticipates that SHP's six shows will fall on the same dates next year. She may change the nature of a few shows, and she'd love to add a jumper-oriented competition next fall. A fifth warm-up ring and a permanent cover for the spectator area between the main rings are among Herman's top off season upgrades. Herman is upgrading her knowledge by working at two shows organized by international jumping star Rodrigo Pessoa this fall, in Paris and Brussels. She'll be working in the hospitality area with an eye toward stealing any and all ideas that could be successfully incorporated at the Horse Park. She has questionnaires heading out to trainers to gather their feedback and get a handle on their plans for 2011. Our bet is that many of those plans will include a full slate of showing at the Sonoma Horse Park.

The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at kimfmiller1@mac.com or 949-644-2165.

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