

The 2006 Internationals: What's Hot, What's Not

In the past, The Equiery has surveyed its readers regarding two world-renowned Maryland competitions: the Washington International Horse Show and the Fair Hill International Festival in the Country. The topics varied from parking and programs to feature events, entertainment and even shopping.

As announced in the December, 2005 issue, we've now handed the survey "reins" over to the competitions themselves. But rest assured, dear readers, that we haven't lost interest. Herein, a look at our staff members' impressions of this year's events.

Fair Hill International

What's not to love about Fair Hill? A showcase for top-notch eventing and driving in a scenic natural setting, it also features a country festival that includes many non-horse related events, with food and vendors galore.

Three cheers for this year's innovative use of the William duPont Jr. main arena to bring the action closer to the spectators. The combination of driving hazard and cross-country fence was brilliant, and running the Pony Club games competition alongside the driving marathon kept the pace going without fazing the competitors.

Fair Hill's decorations were gorgeous, as befits an event of this caliber. Rather than potted mums thrown casually about, we noticed pumpkins and other strategically-placed tokens of the season.

Paid Trash Removal?

And the weather – ah, well, Fair Hill has a tradition of ups and downs in that department, often within the same event. Such was the case this year, with substantial rains followed by high winds. The volunteer crew deserves commendation for its attempts to maintain good footing on the cross-country course. (In fact, the Fair Hill volunteers deserve recognition for much more than that – to keep them coming, maybe someone should spring for paid trash removal next year?)

As for the festival aspects of this event, we dearly love the dog agility trials, and the food leaves standard horse show fare in the dust. The trade show, however, is down from multiple tents in past years to one tent, and some old favorites are definitely missed.

Overall, we don't think that the festival itself would attract many people from a distance – but the main events are worth it for anyone who loves horse or dog sports, and the festival is a nice plus.

Oh, and keep up the good work on the program! It's a keeper. A big pat on the back, too, to announcer Brian O'Connor, who has a real knack for bringing on-course action to life for every spectator.

Washington International Horse Show

The Washington International is an old favorite that's gone through a lot of changes over the years. Its 2006 offerings at the District of Columbia's Verizon Center were an intriguing mix of old and new, with enough meaty competition and between-class entertainment to satisfy most.

The return of the Dressage Invitational was warmly received; we felt that it had just the right number of competitors and took just the right amount of time to appeal to the average spectator. As for the jumper classes, most of us felt that they were real showstoppers, and we applaud the faster, jazzed-up formats. However, a few of us preferred the peaceful rhythm of the hunter classes – the show's bread and butter – to the fire and frenzy of the evening jumper events.

'Sport-tainment' Spectacular

The evening "sport-tainment" provided a nice contrast to the daily nitty gritty of the horse show. Part demonstration and part competition, they were generally worth the price of admission, especially the cross-discipline competitions (do we sense a trend here?)

A few of us weren't keen on the après-polo presentation of the donation to the Work to Ride program. While the program itself is a worthy one, some felt that the presentation was more about the presenters than the charity, and would have been better accomplished elsewhere.

Washington's announcers do a good job, and seem to improve with each passing year. We felt that they added verve to their commentary. The souvenir program is another tradition that seems worthwhile for the most part.

By the way, we spotted at least one repeat judge this year; some of us would prefer to see fresh faces across the board.

Setting the Pace

Although this year's show seemed to move along at a good pace, some believed that the setups for the terrier races and the jumper classes took too long, and that there should be some short entertainment booked alongside these particular setups to help pass the time and maintain spectator attention.

In addition, Friday night's show went late and Saturday night's ended too early; what's up with that? Perhaps one of the premier Saturday night events could be shifted to Friday night?

It's sometimes good to leave an audience wanting more, and while we applaud WIHS' efforts to ensure that the evenings do not drag on, Saturday night – because spectators are not arriving frazzled from work – is the one night on which they could capitalize on that energy, giving the crowd more for its money.

But we can also understand how the show

management and volunteers might be worn out by Saturday night!

We would suggest that TicketMaster consider open seating on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, when the crowds aren't generally as big. While we're at it, why can't a ticketholder who arrives at 5:30 p.m. use his 6 p.m. evening show ticket to get in a little early? This would allow spectators time to shop with the vendors before the show.

We at *The Equiery* love being a part of Barn Night. But how about bringing more of the Gambler's Choice riders back for autograph signing with the kids? This is something that keeps aspiring equestrians coming back year after year – a real "grace note" on the whole event. Not having this opportunity seems a bit anticlimactic.

We also feel that the Mule should be paraded about during the drawing; after all, it's the grand prize! And if you've got it, flaunt it!

The management did a great job tightening up the Barn Night schedule. But the Barn Night people are being hustled out a little too quickly, we fear.

The vendors at Washington got mixed reviews from our staff. Some were bored with what they branded a limited array of products, while others thought that the wares had improved from former years and offered something for even the more discerning shoppers.

Sweet Charity

Last but not least, we felt that Washington's lack of a compelling central charity is a problem that needs addressing. It has been explained to us that the WIHS is a 501(c) 3 organization which, given the overhead at the Verizon Center, is focused on making ends meet first. However, by partnering with the right charity, said charity can bring a unique energy to the show (not to mention more volunteers) as well as increased marketing opportunities for ticket sales, which – in turn – thrills sponsors, helping to ensure their longterm support and community recognition of the show as more than just another spectator event.

For some of us, the Washington International Horse Show remains an event with a capital "E" – something really special to savor. For others of us, it's at least a good excuse to visit Washington for awhile.

Visit www.equiery.com for an upcoming release regarding Washington's 2007 dates and location.

The Equiery staff members who contributed to this review were Crystal Kimball, LuAnne Levens, Tracy McKenna, Laurel Scott, Carolyn Del Grosso, Lynn Hoffman, Lauren Maruskin and Juli Moyer.