

STATESIDE

BY NANCY JAFFER



Coaches are part of the elegance that is a Royal Winter Fair trademark.

The Royal Agricultural Winter Fair's horse show is a blast from the past with an eye on the future. Do not let the pomp of the white tie, tuxedo or floor-length evening gown crowd fool you. They are a reminder of the Royal's historic standards, but this is a fixture that has not been afraid to move forward and think beyond the people occupying the box seats.

Prime night

The Canadian show's 96th edition proved that as, tradition be damned, the featured jumper competition was relocated from its usual rather odd staging on a Wednesday evening to emerge grandly before a sold-out house as the show's proper finale on a Saturday.

"It really is taking our best product and putting it on our prime night," explained Charlie Johnstone, the Royal's CEO, speaking about the move of the \$205,000 Longines FEI World Cup™ Jumping Toronto. One tradition that did continue, however, was a victory by McLain Ward on HH Gigi's Girl. It was the ninth time he has claimed the Grand Prix for the USA. McLain triumphed over a top-class field with riders from eight countries jumping a course designed by Ireland's Alan Wade. He was at the top of his profession after receiving accolades for his work at the FEI World Equestrian Games seven weeks before.

Horse palace

The jumps reflect the show's location. There is a wall with a map of Canada that has an Ontario cutout, a fence with the standard replicating the CN Tower (a tourist spot that has the world's second-highest public observation deck) and always an obstacle that bears the name of the Royal. Equines are stabled in the quaint Horse Palace, where those that are not on the first floor climb a steep ramp to the second level. That facility has its own ring, which is quieter than the Hitching Ring, where horses prepare right before their classes. The area behind the main arena alternately hosts the various breeds and disciplines that are part of the show in an admirable feat of coordination. They come and go without incident, ranging from the huge draft horse hitches whose drivers have to duck to clear the ceiling pipes as they go back and forth, to diminutive harness ponies, hackneys, roadster ponies and entries taking part in the Horsemare Indoor Eventing Challenge.

Regulars

Many of those who compete are Royal regulars, and McLain is one of them. It is 22 or 23 years that he has come to the show. He has not kept track of the exact number of times, which are lost in a happy haze of victories and memorable experiences. While he travels the world to compete, McLain always returns to the Royal. During the era when the show hosted a nations cup, he remembered coming up for the first time as a naïve 17 year old with the late US team rider, Tim Grubb, "and learned 'how to do the Royal week properly,' as he would say," McLain recalled. "We ate a lot more then. I would normally go home about ten pounds heavier," he chuckled. But he still has favorite restaurants he visits around the city. He enjoys staying in the grande dame of a hotel, the Fairmont Royal York, where you can find riders after the show at the Library bar, hashing over what happened in the arena that evening. "I love it here. I think this is one of the great events in our sport. The atmosphere, the way they have been able to hold onto so many traditional aspects of the event. It is a phenomenal evening. It is one of the few places I come to watch something other than what I do," said McLain, who even enjoyed riding on a coach with his wife and daughter.

In unison

McLain's appreciation of the show is echoed by the other riders, practically in unison. Devin

Ryan, making his first visit to the Royal, was McLain's teammate on the squad that won gold at the WEG. He was second on Eddie Blue in the Grand Prix, where the trophy is given in memory of Hickstead, Eric Lamaze's late, great mount. Tribute is also paid to Big Ben, Ian Millar's famous mount with an important class that bears his name. "It is great atmosphere," Devin said of the show. "If I am able to come back in the future, I will be here for sure. Hopefully, they will name a class after a horse like Eddie Blue, something like the Big Ben someday. That would be pretty cool," he commented, then chuckled, "but maybe not in Canada."

The fair

The Royal started in 1922 to improve livestock genetics in the country, according to Byron Beeler, a former president, who was marking his 60th year with the show. Livestock is still an important part of the fair that swirls around the Coca-Cola Coliseum where the horse show is held. Prize cattle, sheep, goats, rabbits, fowl and other animals play their role, along with a variety of agricultural products. There are always awards for the largest produce, such as the giant gourds. The artful butter sculptures, often depicting playful pigs, are a popular attraction. Ontario products, from the ubiquitous maple sugar items to jams and jellies, wines, smoked fish, cheeses, pickles and baked goods are available at stands in the fair. Several restaurants offer everything

from fine dining to pub food, and culinary activities are becoming an ever-increasing part of the production, with cooking classes a well-attended innovation.

Upcoming centennial

The Royal draws 300,000 people from far beyond Ontario, for it is legendary in its scope and attractions. Once it brings people in, it rarely lets them go. "I grew up in Nova Scotia hearing about the Royal. I have been a volunteer since 1958," Byron said.

"We could not run the Royal if it were not for the volunteers. It is in your blood somehow. You are here because you love horses."

Charlie, who is keeping an eye on the show's centennial four years down the road, will not reveal what is planned for that event.

But former president John Dunlap once leaked some thoughts about the important milestone, while noting, "You cannot stay too traditional, you have got to have some jazz, too. I think for our 100th, we will definitely have our Prime Minister here and we are looking to have a lot of US dignitaries come," John mused. "The Royal family will absolutely be represented." As Charlie noted, "If you think about the last few years and how we have been building this event and making some changes and some tweaks and getting feedback from the riders and our customers, we keep adding to that year after year and make it bigger and better. I think the response from the crowd's been outstanding and it is going to be exciting for the next few years." <



Presentations are done in high style at the Royal.