

Six Decades At The Horse Show

By **Lara Bricker**

For the past 64 years, there's been one constant in George Cole's life: the Washington International Horse Show. Save the two years the show was held at the Tryon International Equestrian Center (North Carolina) during the pandemic, Cole has attended the show every year since it began in 1958.

"My mother used to take me up to New York to [the National Horse Show], and then we caught on that Washington was going to have a show that was going to be the caliber of New York, and it would be here," he said. "And everybody just went crazy."

He's followed the show from its infancy at the National Guard Armory in Washington, District of Columbia, to this year at the Show Place Arena in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, always as a spectator aside from the first year.

"I'll never forget the first show that we went to; President Eisenhower was there. It was just a pretty big deal. He was interested from his Army days and the cavalry," said Cole, 72. "I was in a leadline class, and he came down, and he gave us all a little medal."

He recalled the years that President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy attended, which made the show the place to be socially. But it was always about the horses and riders for Cole.

"My heroes were not like everybody else that was my friends or family, like Mickey Mantle," said Cole, Silver Spring, Maryland. "My idols were the horses, especially Snowman. I just went crazy for horses."

The former Capital Centre in Landover, Maryland, was his favorite venue, while the President's Cup Grand Prix was always the highlight of the show. He appreciated the role the show played in raising awareness of different disciplines and the history of the horse.

When his family moved to Bethesda, Maryland, Cole started foxhunting with the Potomac Hunt (Maryland) and worked at a barn over his summer vacations. He continued to ride through high school and played football in the fall, but WIHS was always on the calendar. It was easy to remember because his mother's birthday fell on Halloween, and it became a family tradition to go together. When he became a geneticist and traveled often for work, he made sure to save the date.



George Cole has made the Washington International Horse Show an annual tradition for more than six decades. *LINDA MACKLIN PHOTO*

"The whole family, wherever we were, we always decided we would meet back at Washington to celebrate her birthday. She loved it as much as I did. Even though she didn't ride, she liked the pageantry, and that was how we would celebrate her birthday," he said.

When he returns each fall, those memories bubble up. "It's more, I feel like I've walked inside 'The Twilight Zone.' I'm walking back to when I was a kid, and everybody's there that I love, and everybody's healthy," he said. "I'm not that religious, but the thing is, there's so many memories of the horses we saw and the riders that I shared with my family, that it became more religious."

Returning this year and seeing other regulars and show employees like senior director of marketing Linda Macklin, who has become a friend, made for a special reunion.

"They were saying, you know, 'We're back, and it's great to see you, man,' and, 'How are you doing?' And everybody didn't take that for granted, especially when they said, 'We'll see you next year,' " he said. "I felt like I was back home."

His mother died 10 years ago, and his other family members are gone, which has made his annual pilgrimage to the show bittersweet.

"I'm looking at a photograph right now at the horse show; I don't know what year it was," he said. "But it's my father, my mother and grandfather, my grandmother and my uncle, and everybody that I have loved. They were in great health, and we're all together. Just looking at that picture brings me back to those days. And when I go back to the horse show, I just feel like I'm going back, and they're waiting for me, and eventually, we're going to all be together." 🐾