

HORSE SHOWS

BELOW: Longines FEI World Cup qualifier winner Daniel Coyle of Ireland on Legacy  
 RIGHT: Willa Gauthier, co-chair of the Royal Winter Fair horse show, in the exhibition of the show's history with her mother's riding breeches from the 1930s  
 BELOW RIGHT: Cawthra Burns with Frank Bruun and Ainsley Hayes



Photo © 2022 by Nancy Jaffer

LEFT: The Royal Canadian Mounted Police performed their last musical ride of the year in front of thrilled crowds

BELOW: Charlie Johnstone, CEO of the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, wore a special tartan scarf designed for the show's 100th anniversary



# The Magic of the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair

WORDS: NANCY JAFFER

## Canada's Crown Jewel Horse Show celebrates 100 years

FOR 100 YEARS, the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto has been a horse show like no other. Of course, no other horse show is set beside a bustling, 1 million-square-foot agricultural exhibition, but there's much more than that to the Royal's magic.

One of the Royal's selling points is attention to equine diversity.

"It showcases the entire sport, not just one element of it," says Royal CEO Charlie Johnstone.

From the elegance of the competition for coaches, each pulled by four majestic horses, the power of the magnificent six-horse hitches in sparking harness, and the lure of rousing exhibitions such

as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police musical ride, the November horse show is must-see entertainment. It keeps the coliseum's 7,000 seats filled.

The finale of the \$5 international jumper division, a qualifier for the Longines FEI World Cup finals, was a sell-out, with fans cheering as fervently as they do for their favorite hockey team. The hunters, lower-level jumpers, and

even eventers and dressage have their place at the 10-day show as well. It's a package that delivers a powerful entertainment punch with equal measures of glitter and substance. Topping it off is the unbridled enthusiasm that greets competitors, putting the show in a class by itself.

"Unbelievable," says Egyptian Olympic show jumper Nayel Nassar, a first-time Royal competitor who won a class and was awestruck by his experience there.

As show jumping course designer Michel Vaillancourt notes, from the exhibitors' standpoint, there is quite a contrast "between performing in front of a sold-out, packed house that

encourages you to go, versus hardly anybody in the stands." The 1976 individual Olympic silver medalist, who began competing as a 15-year-old in the open jumpers at the Royal 53 years ago, adds, "It's a special, special event for sure."

The Royal's history is ongoing. While other North American stand-alone horse shows have gone by the wayside or struggle in the era of burgeoning big-money series and leagues, the Royal stays relevant. The dedication to maintaining the entire event's special aura also involves keeping up with the times, whether in sustainability, education or sport. And then there's the shopping, with scores of vendors selling everything from maple products (of course) to household gadgets and vodka made from milk byproducts, as well as silver commemorative coins struck by the Canadian mint.

Some of the people involved with the horse show proudly point out that they have a great-grandparent who competed in the inaugural 1922 show, and it has been a center of multi-generational family involvement ever since. They are a dedicated core of the all-important volunteer base that helps keep the show going. Elsewhere, descendants of a show's founders may drift away, but that's not the case here.

"It's a piece of their heritage," explains Willa Gauthier, co-chair of the horse show, and they're not going to let it die. Old-fashioned flared breeches made in London 85 years ago for Gauthier's mother, Royal hunter competitor Hazel Higginson, were part of an exhibit at this year's show that detailed the Royal's history, complete with artifacts including trophies and ribbons.

Even a two-year layoff due to Covid restrictions couldn't kill the Royal. This

year's eagerly awaited centennial was celebrated by the Royal's avid supporters, many of whom were back in elegant attire to see and be seen in the box seats draped with blue and wine-colored bunting. That's a tradition handed down by their parents and grandparents.

### NO CASUAL AFFAIR

The formality that once was a hallmark of the National Horse Show in its long-ago Madison Square Garden days is alive and well at the Royal. Women outdo each other in sparkling floor-length gowns, their trains gathering a bit of dust as they sweep the ground. (It is, after all, a horse show.) Their escorts take pride in their black tie, white tie or hunting scarlet attire. Formal dress is required in the boxes for the last four nights of the show, adding to the pageantry.



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Gauthier described what insiders call the “peacock walk,” when showgoers and boxholders alike stroll the walkway around the arena, checking out what everyone else is wearing.

“Toronto likes to dress up. Toronto likes to party,” says Royal Terrace Concierge Ainsley Hayes, who has been coming to the show since she was a month old. Hayes presides at the elegant dining area high above the ring, where the menu may include such delicacies as pan-seared rainbow trout and the service is sublime.

Hayes, the daughter of former Canadian show jumping team member Jay Hayes, spends time explaining the competition and offering horse info to first-time guests.

“That’s how we get people interested, that’s how we get more owners, that’s how we get more people coming in and wanting to learn,” she says.

The stables in the venerable Horse Palace are open to visitors for the most part, so you’ll see school groups mingling with the elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen as they ooh and aah over the horses, up close and personal. A comment that has been made about this juxtaposition is the observation the Royal is everything from “mink to manure.”

Want to enjoy the Terrace every night with your party of eight, who can also party post-show at the members-only Tanbark Club? That will be \$16,500 (Canadian).

But equally welcome at the show are those who attend in jeans and grab something from the budget offerings, perhaps a burger with poutine (very Canadian fries, cheese curds, and gravy).

Meanwhile, over at the fair, there’s a constellation of non-equine activity. Cows and bulls groomed to a gleam, being shown or auctioned; swine, rabbits, sheep, goats and a display of different crops, including giant pumpkins. The artistic butter sculptures are always high-calorie attractions, and there’s a roster of activities that include both sheep herding and sheep shearing, milking demonstrations, square dancing competition, and canine activities. The fair also features cooking classes with world-class chefs. Everything culminates with a rodeo the day after the horse show wraps up.

The theme that runs through the fair and show is “the country has come to the city.” There’s even a fence at the show reflecting that, with the jump standards on one side depicting a skyscraper, and on the other, a red barn.

RIGHT: Royal Horse show director Christine Reupke

BELOW: Jumper rider Tiffany Foster realized a longtime dream when she got to get glamorous and ride on the winning coach with whip John White during the Friday competition

LONGINES

FEI  
JUMPING  
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ABOVE: Sign promoting the first Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in 1922

LEFT: Course designer Michel Vaillancourt confers with McLain Ward

The show was founded when farmers and horsemen got together after World War I to plan an exhibition of Canadian agricultural wares and constructed the multi-purpose building that houses it. (When the show isn’t going on, the arena becomes a hockey rink.) What has become the largest indoor agricultural show in the world received initial support not only from the Canadian government, but also was awarded the Royal designation by King George V of Great Britain.

The connection with the monarchy continues today. A special tartan produced in partnership with “His Majesty King Charles III Campaign for Wool” was designed with 100 royal blue threads signifying a century of champions; light gray threads paying homage to the late Queen Elizabeth’s platinum jubilee and a

band of red for winners (red ribbons, not blue, are first place at Canadian shows) as well as a line of gold signifying the next 100 years.

Charlie Johnstone, CEO of the entire fair and horse show, says that although things went well for the centennial that hosted 300,000 visitors and 6,000 animals, the Royal won’t be resting on its laurels as it starts its next century.

“It really is about being best in class now and moving forward. It’s about all the animals; it’s not just a horse show. It’s the entirety of the Royal, of which the horse show is a key component. We’re in a unique position as an option for people looking for something different. We need to provide an experience that’s worthy of the Royal name and best-in-class experience.”