

League of Agricultural and Equine Centers
March 2017 News

With the arrival of spring, preparations are in full swing for the busy summer season. But The League and its members have not been idle over the winter: whether furthering education in the field, planning facility upgrades or assessing revenue streams, The League members know how to make the most of any season. In this issue of The League news, get a glimpse into the Jacksonville Equestrian Center with General Manager Harold “Bull” Bullington. We have Symposium recaps with valuable information, and also an article from “Venues Today” featuring SMG’s Lesa Williams. Be sure to check the Upcoming Events to add to your calendar!

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Welcome & Acknowledgements

The League would like to welcome Shawn Seabrook from the Equine Science Department at Olds College in Olds, Alberta, Canada, and Jason Harder of Sundry Contracting Co. in Sundry, Alberta, Canada.

Congratulations to Brandi Herndon, Certified Fair Executive, of Tulsa State Fair on her graduation from the Institute of Fair Management in January.

Feature: Harold “Bull” Bullington

General Manager, Jacksonville Equestrian Center

The Jacksonville Equestrian Center’s unique history started with a citizens’ initiative called the Better Jacksonville Plan. After the Navy closed its base at Cecil Field, 2,000 acres of forest land were given by the Navy to the City of Jacksonville for a regional recreation park. The “crown jewel” of the park would be a state-of-the-art equestrian center. With a 123,000 square foot indoor building featuring a championship 150’ by 300’ arena and situated on an 800 acre recreational park, the Jacksonville Equestrian Center (JEC) is now the Southeast’s premier multi-purpose show facility. The JEC hosts events ranging from all disciplines of horse shows to community events like music festivals and even weddings. Harold “Bull” Bullington has been working behind the scenes to ensure the success of the facility ever since it opened in 2004.

Born and raised just north of Tampa in Dade City, Florida, Bull joined the Navy right out of high school and served for 20 years as a jet engine mechanic and production supervisor. Bull credits the Navy with helping prepare him for his current job as the JEC’s General Manager. “The

aviation side of the Navy, especially, is just continuous. You always have to plan, anticipating your problems coming up. It's a big coordination issue," he says. "It does help extremely."

After his time in the service, Bull worked as an environmental engineer. When the JEC opened in 2004, they were looking for an Operations Manager with equestrian experience. Having started out riding rough stock and picked up team roping in the mid-80s, Bull had the right qualifications, including some turf experience. He was hired in March 2004 and became the General Manager in October 2015.

Bull has passed on not only a proud Navy tradition to both of his sons, but his youngest son is an active team roper. Bull himself seldom has time to ride now because he is busy working, but he enjoys it. His favorite part of his job is coordinating with the various entities involved with each event in order to have all the pieces come together for a successful result—although he prefers to do so out of the limelight. "You give me some problems, I'll get 'em fixed," he says with a laugh, "and let somebody else have the glory."

Already a successful event venue, there are more big plans in store for the JEC. "We are currently constructing two new competition rings and a warm up ring to support them," Bull shares. "We are in the planning stages of covering an outdoor arena, which we hope to be able to start construction on over the summer months."

Between the existing top-notch facilities, the upcoming improvements, and Bull and his team providing support behind the scenes, the JEC is "taking it to the Jax" for visitors and events alike.

Upcoming League Events

The League Forum

The League Forum is a round table teleconference sponsored bi-monthly by The League. Every other month a topic will be announced. Interested participants are asked to sign up through the League office, info@laec.info or 859-887-0033. A dial-in number and passcode will be sent the day prior to the call. It is not a toll free call. Long distance charges will accrue depending on your telephone calling plan. Each call will be moderated by a board member or CMEC graduate. Experts may be included on the call to give their knowledge of the specific topic. The times will be 2:00 eastern, 1:00 central, 12:00 mountain, 11:00 pacific and 10:00 Alaskan time.

Be sure to mark your calendars and contact the League office if you wish to be on a call.

Upcoming Forum Dates

April 12, 2017 – Administrative/Operational Budgeting

The League Summer Footing Academy

The League Footing Academy is held twice annually at different locations throughout the country. It provides attendees the opportunity to receive a comprehensive overview of

footing. Time is devoted to soil essentials, arena condition and maintenance, moisture and dust control, indoor and outdoor arenas along with synthetic footing. Attendees are encouraged to bring samples of their dirt for evaluation.

The Summer Footing Academy will be held May 23 & 24, 2017 at Boulder County Fairgrounds in Longmont, Colorado. Check the website for more details as they are finalized.

Feature Article: Lesa Williams in “Casual Spectators Aggressively Courted”

by Linda Deckard

As published in Venues Today, November 2016

Lesla Williams, a 14-year veteran with SMG, has been the private management firm's National Equestrian director since 2007. When she's not jumping from a horse event to equestrian meetings, she oversees Bon Secours Washington Redskins Training Center, Richmond, Va. When interviewed by Venues Today, she was just returning from the opening of another 8,000 sq. ft. of event space at the training center, which the city built in 2013. If only football turf were good for show jumping she could have it all in one, but that kind of multipurpose isn't reality yet. What is real is more spectators, thus more amenities, larger shows and a resurgence of new construction as more communities see the value of equestrian events in terms of economic impact and quality of life.

How has the equestrian center industry changed in the past few years?

It seeks to bring in more outsiders and spectators, which is a big key for us. The bigger events have gotten a little more patron-friendly. At a dressage show, they actually have people scribing and telling you movement by movement how the horses are scored. General spectators can walk the course with a professional, a privilege that used to be just for the pros. I see groups of 80 people gathered around an instructor walking a cross-country course. Our sport experiencing and recognizing education is what it really lacked. Overall, equestrian centers and the kind of experience offered now are much more well-rounded. Shows will tap into the community more – by offering a special golf rate, dinner rate and river walk.

How do you find new fans for equestrian events?

Before, you wouldn't see many horse shows advertised in the event section of the newspaper. I didn't see the outreach as much as there is now. And equestrian events are now getting car dealership sponsors. Sponsorship used to be just the trailer company and the tack store. Now we're actually paying a little for advertising and looking for media sponsorship.

What is the status of new construction in the equestrian center world?

We have two facilities we run — Salt Lake City Equestrian Park and Domer Arena in Topeka, Kan. — where we are lobbying hard and working with advisory boards. Both are well-used venues. We took over Salt Lake in 2014 and helped it get county support to expand. For the past three years, we've been working with them to understand the direction they want to take it. Do they want to improve the equestrian piece or make it more valuable as a recreation site? Salt Lake has decided to invest the needed funds to bring that facility up to the standards you need

now. In Kansas we had peaked out on the type of shows we could do. Shows were banging at our doors saying they wanted to come, but needed more stalls, a bigger arena, or better amenities. The government and public have now agreed to a small tax, which will generate the \$40 million needed. Construction starts in 2018, to be completed in 2020, which will move that venue into larger regionals. The focus is on new stall barns and more RV spaces. Both projects were approved in the last four to six months. That's what I love; I'm about where we keep going. In Jacksonville, Fla., where I started, we had 100 stalls (seven years later it's 400), one arena (now four arenas) and 20 RV spaces (now 80). Expansion was part of a master plan. But unless you have someone pushing the master plan piece, it falls off the edge because a new administration comes in and may not have the same vision.

Do most improvements for equestrian centers focus on back of house?

Our bread and butter is RVs and stalls. But more and more people realize if they do a better job at concessions, you probably could make more money. One of the things I've instituted at some of the smaller events for concessions is to call and order in. Rather than having a concession stand open for 12 hours where everyone loses money, we will deliver lunch between 11 and 1. We give them a menu and we drop it off at the barn. For small shows (anything with under 200 competitors), you really don't want them going to McDonald's and bringing it back. We've done group spaghetti dinners. We put it in the packet ahead of events.

Are these ticketed events?

For big shows, there are two different models — either Thursday-Friday is free, Saturday and Sunday have a finals ticket price, or there is a basic full rate for the whole week. Most are not high prices.

What do competitors pay?

It's all over the map, with VIP packages from \$800-\$2,500. Stalls can go from four day weekends for about \$100 in some disciplines to \$280-\$300 for higher end disciplines. SMG just hosted the Longines Masters Los Angeles at the Long Beach Convention & Entertainment Center Sept. 27-Oct. 2. It was an amazing four days. It was designated as the number one show jumping competition in America by the North American Riders Group. They were test driving Lamborghinis outside the venue. The people at that show paid much higher prices than I just quoted. There were 210 horses; a gala Thursday night with 800 invited guests; two sessions Friday, two on Saturday, one on Sunday. They transformed the parking area into stabling and used the loading dock to enter the main arena. Load in took six days; load out three days, so they were ready for a marathon registration on Wednesday. That event is like Dressage at Devon (Pa.) Horse Show Grounds (not an SMG account); for that weekend you're a horse person. In Devon, they have beautiful furniture on display and you're watching some of the prettiest horses in the world, but I bet a lot of those people have never been on a horse.

Are there potential arena events in the equestrian world then?

One gentleman I'm working with now wants to bring Equitana (basically an equestrian world's fair, consumer and retail trade show that was last in Germany) to the U.S. I think it will probably end up in a venue like Kentucky Horse Park. It needs to be a premier horse center. I'm working with him in an advisory capacity. But from those conversations, we now have another series he's looking at that could fit in our centers, possibly some of our convention centers. When you have

220 venues, four of them strictly equestrian, you can still say, what if we brought dirt in there? I work with League of Agricultural and Equestrian Centers helping the industry as a whole. Sometimes SMG doesn't have that venue that will fit right now.

Is there a day when there will be more equestrian events in convention centers and arenas versus horse grounds and fairgrounds?

Before I would have said no, but now I can see why you would do it in Long Beach. And there's that big show jumping series in Central Park now. Some horse events are better suited to be in a location where you are really going to draw people. Being creative will always be part of our business.

Has technology impacted the equestrian world?

It's important. We have screens in equestrian centers that get people up close. You can now go into a tent and watch a round. Wireless adaptability is the same as anywhere else. Technology has to be everywhere, even on a cross-country course. You have to have WiFi in RVs.

Is security a big issue in the equestrian world?

The climate has changed. We do have people at gates checking bags sometimes and checking who is coming in and coming out. It's more often that people request security, including overnight. The value of what everyone has is so much higher. And security of spectators is a priority. The Boston Marathon bombings showed us all we all have to be more vigilant.

Symposium Recaps

The annual League Footing Academy and Symposium was held in January 2017, featuring a broad range of speakers, presentations and discussions. In each issue of the newsletter, we will bring you recaps of some of those sessions. Powerpoints and other resources are also available in the members-only section of the website.

Grow Your Revenue with Online Marketing

Presented by Cassie Roberts of Saffire

People form opinions based on what they read or what their friends are posting online. People believe online, user-generated content more than brand produced content. Especially in the case of millennials, user-generated content influences purchasing. While directly controlling what other people say about you online is not possible, influencing it is. Use your own account to re-use the good things that people say about you, such as re-sharing online and possibly even using satisfied users' content in traditional media.

Brand ambassadors can be paid or given perks for posting good reviews, such as access to a VIP atmosphere that attendees will want to share. Get user-generated content flowing. Use brand ambassadors to give away prizes and generate buzz. Find people with lots of followers who might be interested in your event or venue, such as a "foodie" to try fair food.

Facebook changes what you can do often. People want to see videos, which have 135% greater organic reach than photos, which is increasing each year. People are watching live videos three times more than pre-recorded content. Consider live, raw-footage clips such as behind-the-scenes clips of events. Facebook is giving these videos priority, and builds trust in viewers. Participation in live videos is monumentally greater, and using calls to action in videos can spark user content.

Video ads on Facebook can include direct calls to action, such as a “learn more” or “sign up now” button. Video advertisements are expected to have a higher video quality than live clips. Stock video clips are available to use, customized with your own content from online vendors such as Promo and WeVideo, which also allows inclusion of pictures and music. iMovie comes standard on many iPhones, which can be used to create videos from clips and photos that you have on your phone. When creating video ads, also place them on your website near the call-to-action, whether it is to purchase a product, join a group, attend an event, schedule a tour, etc.

Facebook Messenger is increasing in importance and features. For a business, it allows direct messaging to and from clients. Large companies are building autoresponders for Messenger, which will respond instantly to consumers. This kind of “bot” could be available for facilities to purchase in the near future. The use of Facebook Messenger allows for push notifications, so if a customer messages a business and the business replies, the customer will be notified of the response without the business having to invest in advertising or their own app. Facebook tracks the response time of businesses and displays that on a company’s page. Having a lower response time creates a sense of accessibility and increases interest. Facebook also incorporates business ratings, which can be enabled or disabled on a company’s Facebook page. This allows up to 5-star ratings from consumers as well as reviews, similar to Yelp. This is a great way to embrace user-generated content with no investment.

Snapchat offers businesses the creation of a Geofilter, which is a paid “filter” for your facility which ads the facility or event logo to photos users take while there. Basically, consumers create their own ads using their photos and your logo or artwork. You can set the days and even times that your filter will be available, as well as the physical area that users can access the filter. When a consumer is in the area at the specified time, Snapchat will notify the user that the filter is available.

Money spent via mobile phone is expected to triple from 200 billion in 2014 to 600 billion in 2018. Mobile-accessibility is a key factor in today’s changing technology environment. It might be hard to keep up with social media and what is up-and-coming. SocialMediaExaminer.com has a lot of information and updates, as well as via Saffire’s website or many social media accounts.

Working with Show Managers and Judges

Paul Stanley, National Barrel Horse Association: When it comes to choosing a venue for an NBHA event, some of the major considerations are heated or air-conditioned arena, and a nice warm-up arena that is fenced in and away from the main arena. Usually they look for venues with at least 300 permanent stalls as well as RV hookups. Communication with facility managers is a good indicator; some managers make sure things are ready, such as having bedding in stalls,

etc. Generally the NBHA schedule stays the same each year and goes back to the same facilities if they're good.

The NBHA brings its own crews and equipment. Footing for barrel racing should have some cushion, and they do light drags every five riders with deep drags every 50 runs, but the ground condition varies depending on the area of the country and how riders from that area prefer it prepared. At an event, managers try to fit in 50 runs per hour, but they average 43-44 per hour overall. There is no barrel racing on synthetic ground. Show managers can be the mediators between facility managers and participants. Good show managers should protect facilities and their managers and deal with participants directly.

Katie Young, USEF Hunter Judge: The most important thing in the hunter world is footing – not too deep, too hard, or too slippery. From a judge's perspective, it's important to have a place thought out with total, easy visibility, protected from the elements. Between classes, having a place to relax away from exhibitors is nice. Restrooms close by are also nice, as often a judge doesn't have a lot of time to take a break. Sometimes judges will walk a course and can make recommendations as far as the footing goes and things that need to be changed or avoided. Places to lunge and prepare with adequate footing are important. Judges are hired by show managers, so feedback is best given from them or the show office staff. The judges communicate with whoever hired them, and should not be approaching facility staff with suggestions or requirements.

In looking for a facility, safety, footing, having things in good repair, good restaurants and good hotels nearby, how user-friendly it is, and traffic are some additional considerations. Keeping people informed via communication and an adequate PA system is important. Some footing will need to be dragged under the jumps, others will hold up better and can be dragged around. A lot of synthetic footing is being seen that helps with weather variables, but it seems that horses stumble more often on it.

Jaqueline Nadler, international competitor: There are differences between facilities in the US versus abroad. In Greece there are only tie stalls, and in other countries none at all. Generally the horses are okay with things, but it's the people who have problems with the lack of facilities. The United States and Europe have beautiful facilities with covered arenas and nice stalls. Things important for a horse show location include the PA system and communication so that everyone knows what is going on. Paths for horse trailers getting to the facility should be easy and clear.



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