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The Show

Heather C. Watson
goes backstage at the league



The Show

It's not your mother's charity event

by Heather C. Watson

Sundress- and Seersucker-clad high schoolers take their grandstand seats among boots-and-jeans-wearing. Saddlebred enthusiasts. Small children enjoy stick-horse races and pony rides. Well-heeled spectators sport Clubhouse attire while taking their reserved box seats. It is easy, just for a moment, to allow the regally-clad dressage riders, gaiting horses, and historic Red Mile backdrop to transport you to an era of glamour and simplicity. Just as you settle in to your 1930s fantasy – totally vindicating yourself for not making the casting call for Seabiscuit – you notice the Lexington skyline on the horizon. The juxtaposition of charming, old-timey harness races with the skyscrapers and condos could serve as a snapshot of Lexington itself; rooted in its history and traditions, yet striving for a bigger future.

The Lexington Junior League's 74th Annual Charity Horse Show takes place July 5th – 10th at the Red Mile. The six-day event, comprised of amateur and professional exhibitors showing horses in a variety of dressage and harness categories, is the first jewel in Saddlebred racing's elite Triple Crown (followed by Louisville's Kentucky State Fair World Championship and the American Royal, in Kansas City). Known merely as "Horse Show" to participants and League members, the event has become a summertime tradition for a variety of Lexingtonians.

League member Shannan Stamper Carroll counts organ player Gene Wright

among her favorite Horse Show traditions. "He seems to turn any song into something jaunty for the horses to perform to," Carroll raves, "My personal favorite was when I realized the peppy song he was playing was Folsom Prison Blues. It sounded better than you think it might — he kind of captures the tone of the guitar break in the middle of the recording."

The star of the Junior League Horse show is the majestic Saddlebred horse, a versatile Kentucky native. Originally bred by plantation owners for its sure-footedness and steady gait, the Saddlebred was developed in Kentucky in the early 19th Century. Previously known as the Kentucky Saddler, the breed was considered to be an ideal cavalry horse; both Generals Grant and Lee rode Saddlebreds during the Civil War. As motorized vehicles took the place of work horses, Saddlebreds became known for their pageantry as show horses, soon earning the nickname "Peacock of the Horse World." Following the long tradition of Saddlebreds in Kentucky (the first known Saddlebred show took place in Lexington in 1817), the Lexington Junior League established their Charity Horse Show in 1937. The event has since grown to present a vast array of equestrian competitions involving Saddlebred and Roadster Horses as well as Hackney and Harness Ponies. The Show continues to adapt to fit exhibitors' demands; this year, the Show debuts three new categories of Western Pleasure exhibits.

As the world's largest outdoor Saddlebred horse show, the Junior League Horse Show features nearly \$70,000 in prize money for winning exhibitors. Due to the show's impressive scope and storied history, "winning at Lexington" carries considerable cache among Saddlebred exhibitors. In addition to ribbons and cash prizes, exhibitors compete for the prestigious Perpetual Trophies, prestigious awards which carry the names of longtime friends of the League and the Saddlebred industry.

Saddlebred Horses are judged in the show ring based on brilliance, ring presence, endurance, athleticism, manners and training. American Saddlebreds compete in four primary divisions: Five Gaited, Three Gaited, Fine Harness and Pleasure. Five Gaited, Fine Harness and Show Pleasure horses are exhibited with full manes and tails; Three Gaited Horses that are shown with their manes clipped to accentuate their long, fine necks. While in the show ring, Saddlebred Horses exhibit alertness, head up and ears forward with an arched neck, and a preening attitude. These exacting standards are upheld by a panel of judges selected for their national expertise on the Saddlebred circuit.

Even though the Horse Show exhibitors are held to highly exacting standards, many attendees find that you don't have to be knowledgeable – or even particularly "horsey" – to enjoy the show. Junior League member Tanzi Merritt, a Lexington librarian and member of the March Madness Marching Band, admits that she has never

really had much interest in horses. Merritt notes that while she has spent many years contributing her volunteer hours to the Show, she had never paid too much attention to the show itself. She adds, "Last year, I got the chance to sit down with someone who'd never been to the show before and actually watch it." The Show provided a far greater scope than she had imagined: "I thought it would be just single horses and riders dressed like the [dressage] rider on the typical Junior League Horse Show poster," she notes. "I had no idea that I would see so many different types of carriages or that there would be such elaborate costuming for some classes."

In addition to the pageantry of Horse Show competition, the Junior League has organized a schedule of special community events to keep attendees both entertained and informed about the League's mission. The Gaited Gallery, located at track level in the Red Mile Grandstand, is a unique collection of shops presenting equestrian-themed clothing, artwork and keepsakes, as well as Horse Show souvenirs. The Show's daily events center around themes of women and children's health initiatives, the focus of all chapters of the Association of Junior Leagues International. The Show kicks off on Monday with Community Night, which honors the League's present- and past-funded agencies. Tuesday, the Show pledges to turn the Red Mile "pink," raising money and awareness for breast cancer charities including the local chapter of Susan G. Komen for the Cure. Wednesday is Family Night, fea-

turing the always-popular stick pony class for children aged eight and under, as well as pony rides, a bouncy house, and other kids' activities sponsored by Raising Cain's restaurants. Thursday is Go Red night, spotlighting women's heart health. Friday's festivities include a fashion show luncheon and the evening's main event, the cocktail party Gala. Saturday's Championship events are highlighted by a salute to the U.S. Armed Forces, with all military personnel and veterans receiving free admission.

While many of the Horse Show events preserve the original flavor of years gone by, it's hard to imagine a group of 1930s League matrons planning events with flamboyant fashion maven Carson Kressley. Kressley, a fashion stylist, reality television fixture, and longtime Saddlebred enthusiast, was the Master of Ceremonies for last year's Horse Show Gala and is hosting Friday's fashion show luncheon. The luncheon, which will include the Lilly Pulitzer equestrian print of his own design, will be held as a joint project of the League and the American Saddlebred Horse Association, on whose board Kressley sits. The fashion show's colorful and irreverent take on equestrian prints, along with Kressley's commentary, are almost assuredly not your mother's Junior League luncheon.

In addition to catering to a more diverse crowd than ever before, the Junior League Horse Show has proven itself to be a big business for Lexington's summertime economy. While the Horse Show's long history has secured it a place among Lexington's favorite summertime traditions, it also presents a significant tourism boost for the city. The Junior League Horse Show was named one of the State's Top 10 Summer Festivals and Events for 2010 by the Kentucky Tourism Council, and is projected to attract nearly 30,000 spectators. As visitors and exhibitors eat, sleep and shop while participating in the Horse Show, they spend money: out-of-town visitors are expected to generate nearly 10.4 million dollars in revenue for the city of Lexington during the 2010 show.

The Horse Show serves not only to gen-

erate revenue for local businesses, but also to raise money that will ultimately be redistributed by the Junior League to deserving community agencies throughout Central Kentucky. The Show serves as the Junior

most major charitable initiatives within the city. The League's earliest initiatives, Baby Health Services and the Lexington Children's Theater are now well into their seventh decade of improving life for Lexington's children. No longer solely the purview of the pearl-clad "Ladies who Lunch" crowd, the League is comprised of dynamic, successful women who leverage their League membership as an opportunity for both professional networking and volunteer opportunities. Says Lexington attorney Nanci House, "I joined the League to meet people close to my age who were involved in the community. After college and law school were over, I felt like there was a disconnect and everything seemed to become more about work and less about serving the community." House notes that her membership in JLL has led to additional volunteer opportunities, and that she now sits on the Board for the Chrysalis House.

The trainings, leadership roles and volunteer opportunities that the Junior League of Lexington affords its members are invaluable, according to House, "It really is amazing that this group of women, who have very busy lives outside of the League, can come together and raise some much money and awareness and help so many people and make friends all at the same time." The Horse Show illustrates her point; the largest outdoor Saddlebred show in the world is planned and implemented by busy women – Mothers, Lawyers, Ph.D.s—who volunteer their "spare time" to League projects and community service.

The Lexington Junior League Charity Horse Show promises its attendees a fun mix of tradition, local interest and community involvement. The decades-old competition, full of pageantry, skilled competition, and history, has adapted to meet the interest of younger participants while retaining the charm of its tradition.

Cash covers and Carson Kressley are perhaps a far cry from the 1937 Horse Show, but promise a lively and classic Lexington event.

Ace Writer Heather C. Watson is a long-time Junior League member. She hopes to see y'all at the Horse Show Events.

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League of Lexington's primary fundraising activity. Since its inception in 1937, the event has raised more than \$3.75 million to benefit regional charitable organizations. Local agencies that currently receive funds and volunteer services from the Junior League include the Manchester Center,



photo courtesy Howard Schatzberg Photography

the Alzheimer's Association, the Carnegie Center and God's Pantry. Junior League members work year-round to prepare for the show, forming committees to oversee everything from trophy sponsorship to exhibitor hospitality. Every active member of the Junior League contributes extensive volunteer hours to produce the show.

Like the Horse Show, the Junior League of Lexington itself has adapted to meet the demands of the 21st Century. Founded in 1924 to promote voluntarism among women and support the Lexington community, JLL has provided the assistance of both financial contributions and volunteer hours to

Horse Show Nightly Events

Monday

Community Night

The Junior League of Lexington honors its past funded agencies.

Tuesday

Paint the Red Mile Pink

Please wear pink to help bring awareness to breast cancer treatment.

Wednesday

Children's Stick Horse Class

6:15pm Registration table will be behind the announcer's booth. Entry fee is \$5.00 per child. You can register at www.lexjrleague.com

Raising Cane's Family Night

6:45pm Come join the fun with bounce houses, pony rides and much more. Located by the Red Mile Round Barn. Cost: Free

Thursday

Go Red Night

Help support the American Heart Association by wearing red.

Friday

Lilly Pulitzer Fashion Show

12:00pm – 2:00pm The American Saddlebred Museum & JLL will host a Lilly Pulitzer luncheon and fashion show. Tickets can be purchased on line at www.lexjrleague.com

Gala

8:30pm – 1:00am at The Historic Red Mile Round Barn. Tickets can be purchased at www.lexjrleague.com

Saturday

Veterans Night

All military veterans can attend the show for free!

Ladies Night for JLL Sustainers

6:30pm Cabaret Cocktail party for Past Horse Show Chairs and League Sustainers at The Red Mile Clubhouse