

Written by by Kim F. Miller

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Veteran show jumpers realize their wish list in launch of new hunter/jumper series at Galway Downs this April.

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International show jumper Ali Nilforushan is a go big or go home kind of guy. The 2000 Olympian and 2006 World Cup Finalist has long wanted to elevate the caliber of West Coast competition and he and his wife and fellow pro rider Francie are putting their ideas to action with the inaugural Temecula Valley National Horse Show. The three-week, top USEF rated hunter/jumper series debuts April 17-22, then resumes with back-to-back weeks May 22-June 3, all at Galway Downs in Temecula.



Ali hates the exodus east or overseas that most West Coasters make at some point. He can say that because he was one of them himself, having taken his jumpers to the Winter Equestrian Festival in Florida for several seasons. “We are losing riders at an unprecedented level,” he asserts. In an earlier era, it was typical for Californians to go east when they hit the Grand Prix level, and usually just for two or three months of the year. “When they came back, we still had some swagger at our shows.” Today, it’s common for California jumpers at much lower levels to campaign much of the year in Florida, and the migrations happen more in the hunter and equitation divisions, too.

It’s time to reverse that. “The goal is to start making people think about California as a great destination for horse shows,” Ali explains. Along with the footing, courses and prize money that will attract top talent from throughout the country, the Nilforushans are planning big name concerts, movie nights and fine dining opportunities intended to draw crowds beyond the participant base.

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“We want to draw new fans in with the entertainment and see if we can retain a certain percentage of them to come back and see more.” And they want to inspire existing fans to know and celebrate the sport’s history, particularly that of local stars like Hap Hansen, Susie Hutchison, Eric Navet, Mandy Porter, Richard Spooner and Rich Fellers, by showing videos of their big wins over the years. “It’s hard to educate young riders about the future if they don’t know anything about the past.”

An early major sponsor is making it possible to showcase the sport at its most exciting, with a purpose-built Grand Prix arena ringed in VIP areas and a jumbotron and marquee classes with an estimated \$500,000 in prize money on offer. Ali expects that unique equitation and hunter classes will give an equal showcase to those disciplines.

Supporters of many animal welfare causes, the Nilforushans are offering ex-racing Thoroughbreds, with tattoos, free entries for all divisions throughout the series.

Francie and Ali are excited to offer healthy dining options at both ends of the economic spectrum. Organic everything is the mantra, whether it’s five-star fare in the ringside VIP area or tasty tacos from a food truck.



First-rate footing, stabling and competition conditions are “non-negotiable” for all exhibitors, Ali emphasizes. Beyond that, however, he wants exhibitors to have more control over show costs. “At the rates we see now, a kid like me has no chance to start in our sport.” In future years, the Nilforushans hope to create a fee set-up that will allow participants to upscale or bare bones their experience, pending their budget, while counting on equal amenities when it comes to anything involving the horse’s welfare and quality of competition.

Perfect Pairing of Venue & People

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The 240-acre Galway Downs Equestrian Center is the ideal host for the new shows, Ali says. Constant, grounds-wide improvements have been owner Ken Smith's modus operandi for several years now. Along with a racehorse training facility, several arenas and a cross-country course for dressage and eventing competition, Galway Downs hosts a growing agenda of entertainment and special events, making it a perfect fit for the Nilforushans' vision.

Smith and equestrian facility director Robert Kellerhouse are perfect partners, Ali says. "It takes like-minded people to be successful and they both get our vision. Whatever crazy stuff I've thrown out there, they're following right along with me."



Meantime, Ali continues his return to the Grand Prix ranks. He'd been absent from that ring for a few years while assisting fellow pro Karl Cook, but returned to it at the Del Mar National last year with Clarinius. They've had good placings, including a win at the Showpark Summer Festival in July, in four of seven Grand Prix outings. Francie is excelling at the 1.45M division with two horses, Adoro and Virginia 173. They keep their horses at their own facility in Rancho Santa Fe and welcome a small clientele who share their intense focus on attaining short and long-term goals in the sport.

Ali's first foray into show management occurred after he purchased the dates for the Los Angeles National and the LA Preview from the Langer Equestrian Group. He moved those to the HITS Thermal venue, and staged them as the Sunshine Series to great reviews, a doubling of exhibitors and his first run at putting the "show" back into the horse show mix with entertainment and high-end dining opportunities. After that, he turned the Sunshine Series over to Tom Struzzi's HITS management and sought a venue where he'd have more control over every detail.

If all goes according to plan, this year's Temecula Valley National will attract at least 500 horses

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each week and set the stage for bigger things going forward. Four weeks of competition and FEI status are a few of the Nilforushans' targets for next year.

The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at kimfmiller1@mac.com or 949-644-2165.