



***Thermal & Arizona show circuits, and Thermal venue, in new ownership group's hands.***

*by Kim F. Miller*

Talk of the HITS Desert Circuit hunter/jumper series being sold has been circulating for a few years. It happened in early August when the newly-formed Apex Equisport announced its purchase of HITS' hunter/jumper competition series: the two-week Sunshine Series and eight-week Desert circuits in the Palm Spring area's Thermal, and the six-week series in Tucson, AZ. The purchase includes the 3,000-stall competition facility in Thermal, all from Tom Struzzieri, founder and CEO of Horse Shows In the Sun, which is based in Saugerties, NY. The Thermal venue will now be called the Desert International Horse Park.

Apex Equisport is a four-family group led by managing partner Steve Hankin.

Hankin and Struzzieri began discussions in 2017, and the new deal takes effect immediately, with the two-week Sunshine Series, including a FEI Longines World Cup™ Jumping qualifier

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and CSI3\* status, looming in late October. The AIG Million Dollar class that closed out the winter circuit is no longer on the docket and other details of the 2020 Thermal show series are currently being determined.

“These circuits are cornerstone events for the West Coast,” says Hankin. “We have a strong group that is focused on ensuring the shows and facility are set up to provide a safe and healthy environment for horses first.”

Hankin brings a career’s experience in the hospitality industry and many years of following his wife, accomplished amateur rider Lisa Hankin, on the show circuit. The couple lived on the East Coast for many years before moving to California in 2014. Lisa rides with Far West Farm and owns top horses for Jenny Karazissis. Steve, a beginning rider, trains with Carleton and Traci Brooks.

As reference points, Hankin cites the many privately-owned – and some publicly-owned -- equestrian facilities back East that spare no expense in amenities for competitors, spectators and sponsors. “It’s a very different landscape In the West” because venues are more often owned by the public, with the attendant budget and bureaucracy required to make changes.

“That’s one of the unique opportunities with HITS Thermal,” Hankin explains. The property occupies leased land, but otherwise operates as a privately-owned facility. “You can afford to make investments over time and it can be scaled up as a ‘real’ business.”

Hankin first approached Struzzieri in 2017 with a desire to learn all he could about the horse show business. That included talking with trainers and exhibitors on HITS’ behalf about what they wanted. Struzzieri’s contemplation of selling the West properties evolved concurrent with Hankin’s interest in taking over the reins. The three other families that comprise Apex Equisport prefer their names stay out of the news, but Hankin explains they are all active competitors who share a desire to take West Coast sport to the next level.

Early personnel recruits reflect the caliber of competition to which the Apex group aspires. Phil DeVita signs on as Desert International Horse Park show manager. He’s known to Californians through his work with boutique events, the Menlo Charity Horse Show and the Franktown Meadows Hunter Derby, and brings additional experience as a competitor, course designer and

judge. International course designer Alan Wade joins as FEI technical coordinator and course designer. He's familiar to West Coast jumping contenders as a frequent World Cup™ qualifier track designer in the region and for the 2017 Finals in Omaha.

HITS' longtime hospitality and sponsorship coordinator Chris Mayone is part of the DIHP team, and veteran East Coast office manager Brett Waters will lead the office staff. All newcomers will be working closely with longtime Thermal staffers, Hankin states.

The deal didn't happen overnight and neither will any changes under the new ownership. "I'm mostly worried about the Sunshine Series happening in a few months and trying not to embarrass myself," quips Hankin. "We are doing everything we can in the short window of time before the Sunshine Series."

Footing, lay-out and amenity upgrades top the partnership's priority list, and most will be enacted after the 2020 show circuit ends next spring. "Nothing is set in stone," Hankin says. "We want to take our time and listen to people."

### **Destination Event**

Making the Thermal circuit into a national destination is the overarching goal. In Hankin's view, there are three pieces to the shows' and the venue's success: the facility, the competition and hospitality. "More than better or worse, we are thinking 'different,'" he adds. "People are voting with their feet. There's a reason why the Thunderbird shows (in Langley, British Columbia) sell out in a few days. We have to be competitive with that."

Expanding access to the facility is a priority, Hankin continues. Opening the doors for trainers with students who want a few weeks of training outside the show is a possibility. "For us older adults, it can be a little daunting to come here for the first time during a show," Hankin says from his own experience. Hosting or leasing out the facility for competitions beyond the hunter/jumper discipline is another possibility.

Struzzieri says selling the California and Arizona properties allows HITS to concentrate on shows and venues on the East Coast, where HITS is based, and especially the circuit and venue in Ocala, FL. The Apex group "is committed to continuing to offer quality events in the desert in California," he says. "They have plans to continue to improve both the property and the

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event to ensure a great experience for all the existing and new customers.”

The HITS Desert Circuit was founded in 1992, and originally staged at the Polo Grounds and as an evolution of shows held concurrent with the Indio Date Palm Festival. In 2007, the circuit moved to HITS' then-new Desert Horse Park. It has evolved considerably in attendance, duration and level of competition. For several years, it hosted four World Cup jumping qualifiers and it has hosted the HITS AIG Million class for the past seven years. Both were big draws for top jumping competitors throughout the country and helped bring the likes of Beezie Madden and McLain Ward out west for World Cup points and big prize money.

“I will miss my West Coast clients, as many of them became friends,” says Struzzieri. “This partner group has put a great deal of time into this, and I feel the facility and associated events will be in good hands.”

*The Gallop welcomes news, tips and photos. Contact Kim F. Miller at [kimfmiller1@mac.com](mailto:kimfmiller1@mac.com).*