



Another Man's Treasure

Thoroughbred Classic Horse Show Series: Launchpad To A New Career

by **MARCIE HEACOX**

This month, the growing movement to place Thoroughbreds in post-racing careers gains steam with the debut of the Thoroughbred Classic Horse Show (TCHS) series at the Rancho Mission Viejo Riding Park in San Juan Capistrano on April 20-21.

The series follows other Thoroughbred-restricted competitions created in the past few years in the Northeast and Midwest U. S. Like those events, the TCHS will be supported by the Jockey Club's Thoroughbred Incentive Program (TIP), which sponsors Thoroughbred-only classes. It also builds on the Del Mar-based Del Sol Classic for hunters and jumpers.

The TCHS was initiated by Nicole Schwartz, board president of the non-profit Neigh Savers Foundation. A lifelong Thoroughbred devotee, she hopes to create a larger market for retired racers, who were once dominant in the sporthorse world before European warmbloods became trendy.

"I love Thoroughbreds. I love their heart, their spirit, their athleticism, their versatility—everything that makes them who they are, I love," Schwartz said. "They were always my best friend. It was so sad for me to see these incredible, majestic athletes not given the opportunity to really compete in the show ring anymore."

The series' initial funding came from the California Retirement Management Account (CARMA)'s Siegel-CARMA Foundation, created in 2009 through an endowment from late Thoroughbred owner and breeder Mace Siegel. There are more than a dozen additional sponsors of the series.

Aside from Schwartz, other TCHS organizers include Lucinda Mandella, the executive director of CARMA, Jessica Boyd, an equine blogger and columnist, Jackie Poe, a director of Southern California Thoroughbred Rescue (SCTR), Dawn Mellen, founder of After the Finish Line, and trainer Sterling Ferguson.

Schwartz designed the TCHS as an affordable platform for all levels of riders and horses to gain experience, with entry fees ranging from \$0 to \$100. Trainer and course designer Shauna Pennell-Wilson said many Thoroughbred owners compete on lower-level circuits and will appreciate the savings.

"They'll have a place to show that's not going to be horrifically expensive like some of the larger horse shows," Pennell-Wilson said. "Even smaller, mainstream shows now are so expensive."

To add to the show's accessibility, there are more than a dozen categories to test the breed's versatility. The Hunter Derby, Jumper Stakes and Dressage Challenge have marquee billing, each with a \$1,500 pot. There will also be prizes in combined training, western and showmanship. Each class is further divided into junior/amateur and open levels. Other contests such as lead line and egg and spoon offer more informal competition. Points and ribbons will be awarded through sixth place.

"I think it's a fantastic division for reintroducing Thoroughbreds as quality horses," Pennell-Wilson said. "It gives them an avenue to win and develop a show record."

United States Equestrian Foundation (USEF)-registered judge Dianne Grod will score hunter-jumper classes, and USEF-registered and United States Eventing Association (USEA)-recorded Vicky Stashuk-Matisi will judge dressage, western dressage and jumping.

Organizers encourage each entrant to provide a short biography for their horse to share the various backgrounds and qualities of all the Off-Track Thoroughbreds (OTTBs). The biographies will help determine special awards in such unique categories as "Most Recently Off the Track," "Oldest Horse" and "Aftercare Organization with the Most Adopted Horses at Show." There's also a "Spirit of a Champion" class for horses whose condition precludes them from physical competition. All owners in this class will be recognized for their efforts.

"It takes a special person to want to take on a horse who is going to live for a very long time and whom they're not going to be able to ride," Schwartz said.

For horses and riders still in the learning stages, there will be clinics in multiple disciplines on April 19. In addition to the equine events, there's a welcome dinner that same date, and a luncheon and silent auction on April 21. In keeping with the spirit of helping OTTBs, all proceeds from the event will go to participating California aftercare organizations.

Entries close on Tuesday, April 16. The next shows in the three-part series will be held at the same location on July 27-28 and Oct. 12-13, with cumulative points leaders crowned at the latter. Some of the top horses will then participate in an exhibition in the Santa Anita Park infield on Nov. 3, the day after the Breeders' Cup World Championships. 🐾

