

BY TOBY RAYMOND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY HUBERT SCHRIEBL

# Ride the High Country

*This summer riders from all over the country will flock to East Dorset for five weeks of the Vermont Summer Festival Horse Show.*





*Lead-line class of today builds the stars of tomorrow.*

*right: Hard-working trainer Cindy Harrington with one of her "babies."*

**I**t's 5:30 a.m. It's dark; it's muddy; you haven't finished your coffee; you're tired and most definitely not ready to wake up, but the babies are waiting. They're stamping their feet impatiently, demanding their breakfast now. The trade-off is more than worth it, however, when those soft, round noses come poking out of stall doors the minute you walk into the stable tent, complete with a chorus of welcome calls. And so another day dawns for Cindy Harrington, stable manager for one of the most prestigious hunter/jumper barns in the country.

Cindy is one of the cast of thousands of animals and humans—riders, vets, grooms, trainers, farriers, mane and tail braiders—who turn up in East Dorset every summer for the Vermont



Summer Festival Horse Show. The show has become one of the preeminent stops on the summer competition circuit, and this year, for the first time, will include five consecutive weeks of hunter and jumper competition for riders of all ages and horses of all sizes and colors.

Just after the fourth of July, huge tractor-trailer trucks roll into town with enough stuff to set up a small city. Along with horses, the trucks deliver copious amounts of equipment: potted plants and comfortable sofas, tack, buckets, brushes, mopeds (for getting back and forth from the stables to the show rings) and the ever-present Jack Russell terriers, which seem to be the mascot of choice for a large number of riders.

The riders come from all over the

country to compete for ribbons, prize money and points critical to their year-end standing on the horse show circuit. The show was started in 1994, when owners John and Dottie Ammerman settled on this area as a perfect spot for a major equestrian venue. "We wanted it to be a place where the best riders, trainers and horse people could come together and have fun as well as compete," says Dottie. The scenic Beebe Farm just off Rt. 7 with its level meadows and excellent footing provided the



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perfect location. Along with the good footing, there's also the shopping, fine dining, golfing and concert and summer theater-going in this area which certainly appeals to the horse show crowd.

Actually, Cindy Harrington is on vacation, which means that she supervises only five horses, as opposed to the usual twenty-two, plus the team of professional grooms she manages between farms in New Jersey and Florida. On top of all that, she rides eight to nine horses a day. Her specialty is in schooling the youngsters through a series of exercises designed to build strength, coordination and endurance, comparable to exercises required of all athletes in training. Her quiet manner and soft hands help to inspire confidence as she and her charges embark on their rigorous daily rounds even though her effortless-looking style is anything but

easy.

She's waiting to be called back for the second round of a Pre-Green Hunter Class with DuPont, a magnificent four year old, Belgian Warmblood, one of her favorites. "I love working with the babies (what she calls the horses in her care), but I do get bucked off a lot" she smiles. "It comes with the territory". But when you're young with bones made of rubber, you can dust yourself off and go back for more, which is what Cindy and plenty of other equestrians do almost 24/7.

Life on the circuit is challenging. It's a series of grueling schedules and big productions. It's a serious high-stakes business, which takes discipline and devotion, to say nothing of money. "The toughest part isn't the showing, it's the moving," Cindy says. "Everything that comes out of the trailers has to fit back in, perfectly. And forget about the day off you're supposed to have. If that's the travel day, you're working. All of us are in the same boat. It's like we're gypsies". Perhaps this explains why there's an undeniable "old home" feeling among everyone at the show. "But all bets are off, when we get in the ring", she adds, and she ought to know, having been invited to the championship finals, the ultimate dream come true for every equestrian.

Yet, while Cindy is here to compete as a world class rider, she is also here because she loves Vermont, like so many others here at the show. And, word is that conditions are even better this year. Five all-weather rings have been constructed and schooling areas expanded. Plus, improvements have been made to the ground surfaces in the Grand Prix and jumper rings. Rated AA, the Vermont Summer Festival is ranked as the foremost five weeks of equestrian competition in Vermont.

Competition aside, the show is really about people and horses and horses and people, which is why it's so much fun to watch. Riders zoom around the show grounds in go-carts and mopeds when they're not mounted on flashy and perfectly groomed horses and ponies. Youngsters with beribboned hair braids canter in the schooling or practice rings, along with adult amateur owner-competitors, their hair tucked properly in hair nets, capped by

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Riley Rink at Hunter Park is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing recreational, social, and cultural activities for children and adults throughout the Northshire area.

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Hunters and jumpers compete for cash and rank

the requisite black velvet hunt cap. Spending a day at the show is like being at a carnival—a very upscale carnival to be sure. In addition to world champion horses negotiating a series of five-foot fences, proud parents lead young riders on their ponies in the lead-line class. This is a particular favorite in which judge Jennifer Glass of Florida encourages each child to talk about his or her beloved pony before awarding blue ribbons to one and all.

Needless to say, the riding is amazing, both hunters and jumpers. And just to clarify the difference between the two: Hunter classes judge both horse and rider as they work over jumps and on the flats. They are judged on appearance and "way of going." Jumpers, on the other hand, are scored on speed and the horse's ability to jump. As horses with knock-downs or time faults are eliminated, fence heights are raised, adding to the excitement. "It's really edge-of-your-seat spellbinding stuff," says John Ammerman, show owner and Olympic equestrian judge. The victor is the fastest horse with the least number of knockdowns. And the prize: a trophy, a blue ribbon and a fat check.

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Harold and Jane Beebe's farm. As the show has grown, additional land from the Frost family farm has provided stabling and schooling areas. A

### Show Dates

July 10-14

July 17-23

July 24-28

July 29-August 4

August 7-11

modest admission collected at the entrance is donated to the East Dorset Fire Department and this year, the Manchester Rotary.

This summer, when the green and white horse show jump goes up in the center of Manchester, welcoming the competitors to town, you'll know the time has come for the 2002 Vermont Summer Festival. For information on the show schedule, contact the Manchester and the Mountains Chamber of Commerce at (802) 362-2100. ◊

*Toby Raymond loves horses and loves writing about them.*

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