

## Gaited Horses Compete in Inaugural Three-Phase Event

**The weekend before the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event, gaited horses competed in a similar competition of their own.**

05-04-2007

With the words "Four...Three...Two...Have a good ride!" a starter sent the first horse and rider out on the cross country course. The weekend before the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event was the inaugural United Mountain Horse Gaited Versatility Challenge and Open Gaited Breed Dressage Show near Lexington, Kentucky.

The competition was conceived by Margo Kirn, a Friends of Sound Horses (FOSH) member from Paris, KY, who began riding gaited horses after decades of training thoroughbreds for the race track and three-day eventing. She found that gaited horses were as athletic as any other breed of horse and she wanted to highlight their talents in a three phase event modeled after three-day eventing.

On April 21 and 22, the riders who took up this challenge arrived at a new facility being built by United Mountain Horse Inc., in Winchester, Ky. Upon arrival, competitors completed a dressage test, a stadium obstacle course and a cross country course. The stadium course was inspired by show jumping with banks, an in and out and a water obstacle mingled with traditional trail obstacles. A two-phase event of dressage and stadium obstacle was offered, but all riders chose to enter the full event.

Although dressage purists may question how a gaited horse can do dressage, Betty Ortlieb, a U.S. Dressage Federation judge for the event said that the ultimate goal of dressage is to "learn to be partners with these animals rather than dominate them." She emphasized that this "truly classical" approach to dressage is effective with any breed or type of horse, regardless of the gaits.

Also judging the dressage classes was Diane Sept, of Denver, Penn., a long time judge with the Independent Judges Association (overseen by FOSH). Sept was instrumental in developing the first dressage tests for gaited horses while living in Canada during the 1980s.

The cross country phase took place on the second day of the event, over a course designed with challenging obstacles instead of jumps. Each of the courses took as much brain power as brawn to complete successfully. Horses negotiated bridge and water crossings, and riders were penalized if they arrived at the finish too early or too late.

Many of the owners and riders expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to showcase their gaited horses in a new way. Even some seasoned veterans of the show-ring admitted that they would rather compete in this type of event instead of the more traditional pleasure classes. Bob Lawson, a board member for United Mountain Horse Inc., added, "I can't say enough about this event."

The judges were not immune to the excitement. Dr. Martha Day, a versatility-certified judge from the National Walking Horse Association remarked that the event "was more fun than a regular horse show" and promised to come back next year.