Fitch's Three Day event Draws top riders

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by Carola Lott

The Fitch's Corner Horse Trials this weekend promises to be bigger and better than ever. Of the 325 horses entered in the competition – 20 percent more than last year– 275 are coming from what might be called a distance. Horses from Canada, Mississippi and Florida with their riders are all eager to participate in what has become one of the season's favorite equestrian events. Acres of tents and temporary stables have been erected in the fields adjacent to the Shunpike.

The third running of the United States Eventing Association Area 1 Northeast regional championships at Fitch's will be of interest to the top competitors. The international federation will hold their preliminary qualifier for international riders.

The three-day event begins on Friday with dressage. On Saturday and Sunday the cross-country and stadium jumping phases will keep the courses and rings busy. Depending on the division (Beginner Novice, Novice, Training and Preliminary) the cross county course designed by Derek diGrazia runs between 2.75 to 4 miles, with 24 to 36 obstacles. The show jumping course set up beside the spectator tent consists of between 12 and 15 obstacles.

Three Olympic riders – Boyd Martin, Phillip Dutton and Allison Springer - will be closely watched by spectators and judges. For Boyd Martin it will be his first competition after being sidelined for much of the winter after an ankle operation. Local riders competing include youngsters Alice Roosevelt, Anna and Josephine Duggan and Emma Lomangino.

To celebrate its 20th anniversary, Fitch's is offering $20,000 in prize money. First place winners in each division will receive $500 and sixth place winners get $75 with the other prizes in between. "People do it for the fun and what's more fun than getting money,"

says organizer and host Fernanda Kellogg. For the first time the Pony Club is presenting a prize for the highest placing pony club member in honor of Barbara Meyer. The award is a piece by Peggy Kaufman.

The weekend at Fitch's Corner offers a long list of social and culinary affairs. Friday night begins with the champions' party for the competitors. The Olympic riders will serve as bar tenders. For non- competitors there is the popular Blue Jean Ball. The theme this year is Bermudas and Bling.

The Gourmet to Go division of Slammin' Salmon is providing the food for the party as well as for the most important Sunday lunch, being called " low country picnic lunch" with shrimp and grits and southern specialties. The parade of antique cars directed by co-host Kirk Henckels and Wheels of Time in Pine Plains draws interesting and sometimes exotic species of motorized vehicles. Huntsman Donald Philhower is bringing the Mill-brook Foxhounds to check out the foxes amongst the spectators.

The Fitch's Market, is housed in two tents next to the stadium course - Fashion and Home shops and the Equestrian Village Horse and Hound shops. Organized by famed hatmaker (sometimes referred to as "milliner" in Agatha Christie novels) Diana Niles King, the market will offer shoppers not only ultra chic hats but high end items from the worlds of fashion, leather goods, equestrian art, equestrian equipage, jewelry and tasteful gifts. New vendors from beyond the Taconic Hills will show up with their wares. The market tents will open at 11 a.m. both Saturday and Sunday.

The main sponsors for the weekend are J. McLaughlin, Houlihan Lawrence and Fresh Gourmet.

With 19 years of experience in staging this event, Kellogg and Henckels have learned how to manage the details with consummate ease. The torrential rains have made things more complicated than usual. They installed sump pumps to get the water out of the low-lying fields.

Proceeds from the luncheon go to the Millbrook Rescue Squad, a volunteer emergency medical squad that is a unit of the Millbrook Fire Department. The rescue squad is dedicating an ambulance to Fernanda Kellogg and Kirk Henckels.