

The Millerton News

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Fitch's Corner turns 20: Let the fun begin

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By Tara Kelly



Bill Cunningham, The New York Times society photographer, got close to the action during an awards presentation at Fitch's Corner during the 2011 horse trials. Photo by Tara Kelly

Fitch's Corner Horse Trials (FCHT), which will be held this year on July 19, 20 and 21, turns 20 this year, and the organizers are going all out to mark the occasion. Over the years Fitch's has garnered a reputation as a not-to-miss event. It has something for everyone: For competitors, it has a challenging course that tests their abilities. For spectators, there is a long list of things to see and do — as though simply watching the horses negotiate big, scary jumps wasn't enough. There is also \$20,000 in prize money up for grabs and a new Pony Club Award, designed by local sculptor Peggy Kaufman.

The horse trials, which encompass beginner novice through preliminary levels, judges a horse and rider team in three distinct areas of riding expertise: dressage, stadium jumping and cross-country jumping. The same horse and rider team competes in each phase.

For the last three years, Fitch's Corner Horse Trials has been a designated FEI International Qualifying Event. That means that horses competing at the preliminary level can get a one-star qualification, allowing them to move up the ranks to bigger competitions.

Fernanda Kellogg, the force behind Fitch's Corner Horse Trials, is a little amazed. What started two decades ago as a summer job for her daughter, Fernanda Gilligan, has become, in addition to being a highly regarded sporting event, a hot social event, and not just because of the weather. One that, Bill Cunningham, the New York Times society photographer always attends. He can be seen photographing the action on course, at the Spectator Luncheon and Car Parade on Sunday.

Prior to that there will be the Blue Jean Ball on Saturday night and all weekend long, Fitch's Market will be open. This year in addition to vendors selling their wares, ranging from fashion and home to horse and hound, there will be a book signing. Phillip Dutton, an Olympic rider, will be signing his new book, "Modern Eventing." Kellogg and her husband, Kirk Henckels, host the horse trials at their farm, and they want people to have fun. Eric Hill, one of the organizers, said, "This is a destination event."

Hill made the point that eventing is dangerous. "Riding cross-country is a potentially fatal activity, consequently, there is an underlying tension. First and last, it is a competition."



Boyd Martin cleared a jump in the show ring during Fitch's Corner Horse Trials in 2011. Photo by Tara Kelly

and J. McLaughlin — and local stalwarts — Houlihan Lawrence and Salisbury Bank, among many others — Fitch's Corner has a serious level of support. This in turn makes it possible for them to support a cause very important to Kellogg and Henckels. The FCHT is run as a benefit for the Millbrook Rescue Squad. Last year, the check they presented to the squad was more than \$30,000, and over the years the total contribution from Fitch's to the squad has been more than \$300,000. It's definitely a case of having fun while doing good.

Here are some other big numbers. Kellogg says there are 344 competitors registered. (Last year there were 282.) Of those, 280 will stable on the grounds of Fitch's Corner. Three of the riders competed in the 2012 Olympics: Phillip Dutton (bringing 12 horses), Boyd Martin (with 10 horses) and Alison Springer (six horses).

FCHT expects more than 1,000 spectators (admission is free). Sixty vendors will set up shop in Fitch's Market (last year there were 50) and there will be at least eight different food vendors to ensure that no one goes hungry. Tickets are still available for the Blue Jean Ball and the Spectator Lunch. To purchase tickets or for more information go to www.fitchscorner.com.

But after the riders are done for the day the crew at FCHT wants them to relax. "Having fun is really important. We make it fun," said Hill.

Despite the high level of competition, the FCHT motto is, "Ride it if you can." Hill says one of the best things about this event is, "...we treat a beginner novice rider like an advanced level rider." And they treasure their volunteers. "They are the bread and butter of these events," said Hill. (This reporter has signed up to be safety coordinator for one of the days of the event.)

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