

# 25 YEARS of Capital Challenge

By Emily Riden/Jump Media

In 1993, Oliver Kennedy was visiting Upper Marlboro, MD, to watch horse racing when he noticed that an equestrian arena was being built on the premises. Kennedy, 56, was running a horse show at the Columbia Horse Center in Columbia, MD, at the time, and his interest was piqued.

He soon sought out the venue manager, and in 1994, Kennedy's horse show would be the first one held in The Show Place Arena at the Prince George's Equestrian Center.

Today, Kennedy's first Show Place Arena event has evolved into the Capital Challenge Horse Show known and loved by top hunter and jumper riders throughout the U.S., and on September 28 - October 7, 2018, the show will celebrate 25 years of top competition.

## Hosting the Hunter World

From the beginning, Kennedy saw the opportunity for something special at the Prince George's Equestrian Center, and he immediately invited Billy Glass to partner with him to grow the new horse show. Together they quickly saw another great opportunity: hosting the World Championship Hunter Rider (WCHR) Finals.

"The World Championship Hunter Rider program had been at the Washington International Horse Show (WIHS) at the time," explained Kennedy. "However, it didn't necessarily fit with what they were doing already, so WIHS wasn't really looking to continue to host the program.

"Louise Serio, who was on the board of the American Hunter Jumper Association and involved with the WCHR, happened to be showing at our horse show and said, 'This is great,'" continued Kennedy. "So, Billy and I walked over to her and said, 'We have an idea. We think you should move your show to our new show, and we'll base the whole show around a lot of your program.'"

The team behind the WCHR program agreed, and soon after, the Capital Challenge Horse Show, with many of the same classes for which it's known today, was truly born.

"We created all of the WCHR Challenge Classes that they never had," said Kennedy, referencing the special, year-end classes for which the top ranked riders in each WCHR category – including amateurs, adults, juniors, children, ponies, developing professionals, and professionals – are invited to compete. "Billy and I lost a lot of money the first year we did it, but we knew we had a hit! Everybody loved it; they had a great time, and we knew that if we survived that first year, things would work out."



Maverick Helmer,  
photo by Jump Media



Oliver Kennedy, photo by Jump Media

Things more than worked out—they continued to grow each year, and rapidly, with the Capital Challenge Horse Show quickly becoming one of the most popular and competitive hunter shows in the country. The show offers innovative feature classes, including the \$25,000 WCHR Professional Challenge and the \$5,000 WCHR Professional Finals, in which the top six hunter riders in the country go head-to-head. However, Glass and Kennedy did not stop there.

## Expanding Exhibitors' Options

As Capital Challenge continued to grow, Glass and Kennedy made it a point to listen to what exhibitors were saying about what they liked and what they wanted more of. One of the things that Glass recognized riders, owners, and trainers wanted more of was an opportunity to spotlight young and green horses. So, the Future Hunter Championship was born.

The championship – now called the \$25,000 North American Green Hunter Championship and sponsored by the Wheeler Family – provided the first major year-end championship for horses that fit the US Equestrian pre-green hunter qualifications. Today, it continues as an extremely popular showcase and proving ground for young horses, with approximately 150 entries contesting the 3' and 3'3" Green Hunter divisions at the 2017 Capital Challenge.





3. Hunt Tosh and Liza Boyd, photo by Jump Media

"The Future Hunter [now 3' and 3'3" Green Hunter] division is amazing, and I'm truly impressed with how it has grown over the past few years," said three-time United States Hunter Jumper Association (USHJA) International Hunter Derby Champion Liza Boyd in a previous interview. "I think it's the best thing that has happened to our industry because it has made people want to go out and buy young horses. Horses from this class have gone on to be famous horses, and that is something really special."

With the WCHR year-end finals and the 3' and 3'3" Green Hunter divisions and championship, Capital Challenge has set itself apart as a—if not the—premier hunter horse show. However, from the beginning, Capital Challenge has also been an important destination for equitation competitors, and that's something that has only continued to grow.

"Billy had the idea for a children's medal, and we started that from the very beginning," said Kennedy of the popular Taylor Harris Insurance Services (THIS) National Children's Medal Final. "Originally, we thought we were going to try to be the warm-up show for indoors; by probably the second or third year, everybody was like, 'No, this is part of indoors.'"



5. Popeye K, photo by Michelle Bloch

Like the other shows in the prestigious fall indoor season, including the National Horse Show, the Washington International Horse Show, and the Pennsylvania National Horse Show, Capital Challenge hosts a prominent junior equitation final – the Palm Beach International Academy North American Junior Equitation Championship. However, unlike other indoors, Capital Challenge also offers major equitation finals for all ages and levels, hosting both the THIS National Children's Medal Final and the Ariat Adult Medal Final.



4. Jennifer Bliss and Sugarman

In 2017, Capital Challenge also hosted the inaugural USHJA 3'3" Jumping Seat Medal Final – East, and, following rave reviews, the show will do so again in 2018.

Also new for 2017 was the Low Junior/Amateur-Owner Jumper division, created following requests that the division be added to Capital Challenge's jumper schedule, which already included a \$10,000 North American Medium Junior/Amateur-Owner Classic, a \$10,000 Children's Jumper Classic, and a \$10,000 Adult Amateur Jumper Classic.

For Kennedy, who still manages the horse show today, it's now fun to look back over the past 25 years to see how far the show has come and to remember that it started with one chance visit to the Upper Marlboro racetrack.

"There's something about being lucky enough that you're in the right place and the right time and destiny kind of takes you somewhere," said Kennedy. "We had people who saw Billy and my vision for the show that we put out there, and they were willing to take a shot on us – and it's worked."

"The 25 years of this horse show wouldn't be possible without those people and the exhibitors, sponsors, and staff who support us and believe in the next 25 years of Capital Challenge!"

Learn more about Capital Challenge at

[www.CapitalChallenge.org](http://www.CapitalChallenge.org)

1. Maverick Helmer by Jump Media-4266.jpg – In 2017, Capital Challenge added the inaugural United States Hunter Jumper Association (USHJA) 3'3" Jumping Seat Medal Final – East to an already impressive line-up of equitation finals. Maverick Helmer earned the inaugural win in the class, which returns to Capital Challenge again for 2018. Photo by Jump Media
2. Oliver Kennedy by Jump Media – Show manager Oliver Kennedy outside of The Show Place Arena, home to the Capital Challenge Horse Show for the last 25 years. Photo by Jump Media
3. Hunt Tosh and Liza Boyd by Jump Media-5703.jpg – The World Championship Hunter Rider (WCHR) Finals have been an integral part of Capital Challenge since the early years. Pictured are the 2017 WCHR Pro Finals top two, Liza Boyd and Hunt Tosh. Photo by Jump Media
4. Jennifer Bliss and Sugarman.jpg – Fast forward to 2014, and Jennifer Bliss and Sugarman finished third in the WCHR Developing Pro Challenge and Jenn was named the Developing Pro National Champion. Photo by Shawn McMillen Photography
5. Popeye K by Michelle Bloch.jpg – Wins in the Future Hunter division – now the 3' and 3'3" Green Hunter division – at the Capital Challenge Horse Show have proven to be an indicator of future success. Pictured is 2006 Future Hunter winner Popeye K with Tommy Serio. Photo by Michelle Bloch

