

*A Show Fit For A*  
**NATION'S**  
**CAPITAL**



Photo Courtesy The Washington International Horse Show



Over the course of 60 years, the Washington International Horse Show has transformed from a financially untenable event bound for cancellation into one of the most prestigious competitions in America.

By Laura Lemon





After gaining FEI status in 1973, the Washington International Horse Show hosted Nations Cup competitions every year until the early 2000s. In 1976, the U.S. squad with (from left) USET coach Bertalan de Némethy, Frank Chapot, Dennis Murphy, Buddy Brown and Michael Matz won the team competition over Belgium.



Photo Courtesy: The Washington International Horse Show

Anthony D'Ambrosio and Sweet'N Low set the North American Indoor Puissance Record in 1983 when they cleared the 7' 7½" wall at the Washington International Horse Show. Their record still stands 35 years later.



Pennington Photo





# All 15,630

Washingtonians rose to their feet that Friday night in October 1983. It wasn't because a soaring puck added a number in favor of the Washington Capitals, or because the swoosh of a basketball through a net signaled a Capital Bullets' victory. This was a rarer affair—after all, show horses only made their appearance in Washington, District of Columbia, once a year.

Attending the Washington International Horse Show throughout the 1970s and '80s was a formal affair, complete with a sit-down dinner for the VIP section.

The attire of the spectators matched the occasion. Men dressed in cummerbunds or dinner jackets, and ladies put on their finest jewelry before they traveled to the Capital Centre in Landover, Maryland, to watch a big white horse named after an artificial sweetener make history.

Just the year before Barney Ward, riding French Glandor Akai, had wowed everyone at the Washington International Horse Show as he earned the North American Indoor Puissance Record, clearing the formidable wall at 7' 6 ¾". With last year's excitement still hanging in the rafters, spectators returned to watch the same class with 12 horses, including 29-year-old Anthony D'Ambrosio and his 17.1-hand gray Sweet'N Low, jump a small course before heading to the wall starting at 6'.

Four rounds weeded out the field, so just D'Ambrosio, West German rider Michael Ferves and the 7' 7 ½" tan wall remained. The person who cleared it would take Ward's place as the new North American Indoor Puissance Record holder—if someone cleared it.



For many decades the first lady of the United States served as honorary chairman of the WIHS. Nancy Reagan (*center*) held this role throughout her husband's time as President, pictured with celebrity Zsa Zsa Gabor in 1988.



Brian O'Connor explained dressage while "mounted" during the 1999 edition of the WIHS, which hosted the U.S. League Final.



Al Cook Photo



Budd Photo

President John F. Kennedy (*center*) attended the 1961 Washington International Horse Show with first lady Jacqueline Kennedy (*right*) and Alice Roosevelt Longworth, daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt (*left*). Jackie's horse competed that year with her friend Eve Fout, of Middleburg, Virginia, aboard.

Robert Dover and Devereaux won both the Grand Prix and the Grand Prix freestyle at the Volvo U.S. League Final for World Cup Dressage in 1994. Dressage classes were held at night at the WIHS for 10 years.

"To add to the tension, another \$5,000 was added to the purse, now at \$15,000," wrote Marilyn Cole Finley in the Nov. 11, 1983, issue of *The Chronicle of the Horse*. Sweet'N Low rubbed the wall, but just gently enough that the blocks stayed in place. "The audience reaction was immediate and tremendous. Anthony and his handsome gray were not only congratulated with a standing ovation but a cheering and general uproar that might have been heard at the White House, 10 miles away."

## PRESIDENTS AND PUISSANCE WALLS

By the 1980s, the Washington International was cemented in the calendar as a popular show for competitors finishing out the season, and it was a spectator favorite as well. But its beginning did not suggest such a prosperous future.



Tricia Booker Photo





Photo Courtesy: The Washington International Horse Show

Spectators still love the terrier races at the WIHS, where smaller and much louder four-legged competitors chase a fox pelt over obstacles.



Teresa Ramsay Photo

World Champion eventer Bruce Davidson (right) rode on Hunt Night multiple times for the Mr. Stewart's Cheshire Foxhounds, and he would compete in the hunt teams with his young son Buck Davidson (center). In a 1983 issue of the Chronicle, a reporter wrote, "Spectators gasped at the sight of such a small child facing a 3'6" course as the Davidson team entered the arena, but Buck has been on a horse almost since he was born. He just galloped around the course with a big smile on his face and jumped the last fence abreast of his parents to draw the biggest ovation of the evening."



With riders like Kim Rachuba, Katie Monahan Prudent and Alison Firestone Robitaille aboard, Thoroughbred gelding Whadyasay! earned dozens of tricolors in the hunter divisions at major competitions. He officially retired at the Washington International in 1996 with Robitaille before going to live at her farm in Upperville, Virginia, until his death at 28.



Tricia Bookner Photo



Jack Clark Photography Photo



John Strassburger Photo

A crowd favorite, the WIHS Hunt Night was dubbed “the world’s largest joint meet.” In 1989, the Mr. Stewart’s Cheshire Foxhounds team, consisting of (from left) Mia Marano on The Last Hurrah, Joy Carrier on Fighting Falcon and Jack Trainor on Amadeus, won the hunt team class and the overall Hunt Night Championship.

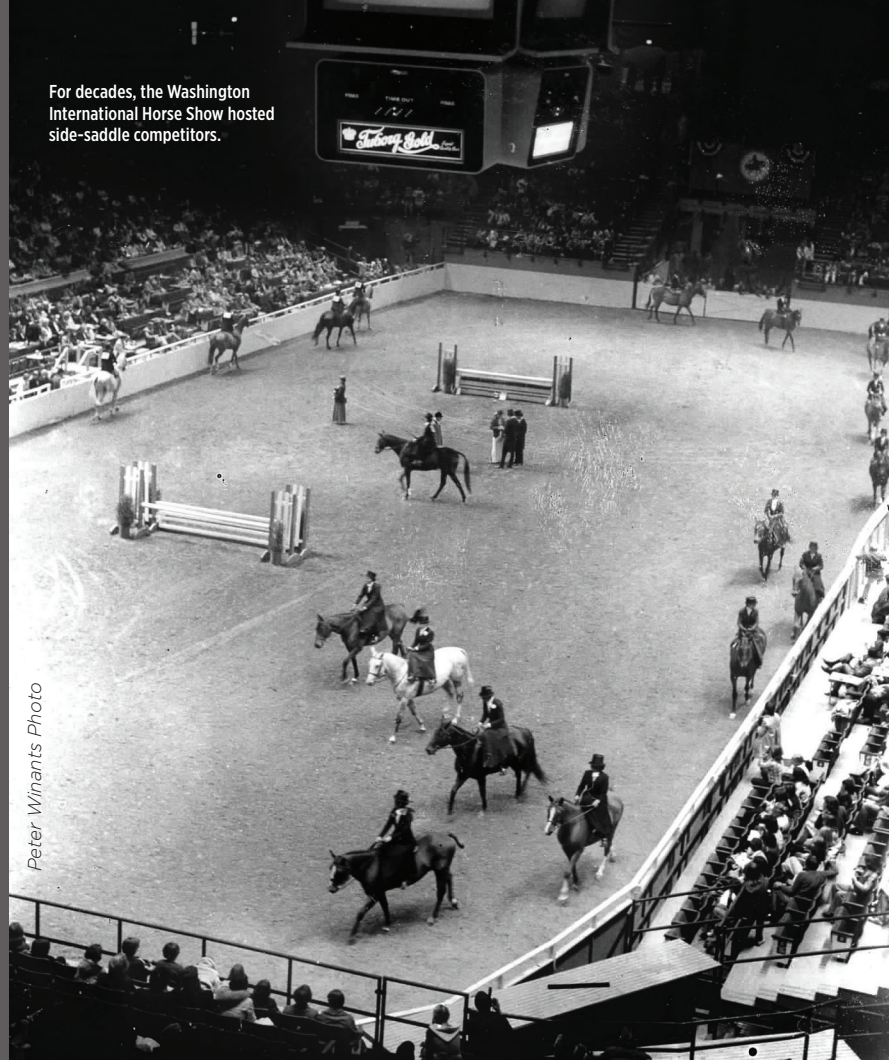


In 2015 Rodney Jenkins was inducted into the WIHS Hall of Fame for his countless wins in the hunter and jumper divisions, including aboard the famous Idle Dice (pictured).





Overhead television screens changed the spectator's experience at the Washington International Horse Show as they provided instant replay of the exhibition and classes.



For decades, the Washington International Horse Show hosted side-saddle competitors.

Peter Winants Photo

Starting at the Washington National Guard Armory in 1958, the competition's organizers hoped the show would join the ranks of the National Horse Show, held at Madison Square Garden (New York) and founded in 1883, and the Pennsylvania National Horse Show, held in Harrisburg, since 1946. While attended by the first family, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Mamie Eisenhower, and many spectators, the show ran a major deficit. In its first two seasons, the competition's loss tallied \$100,000.

Leading up to the 1960 running, rumors swirled that it would be the last year for the show. But that year, things started improving. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy and first lady Jacqueline Kennedy attended, and the show had a relatively successful year.

"The Washington International Horse Show, which many people gave up for dead during those financially disastrous years, was well on its way toward becoming one of the top shows in the Nation as the presence of the President and Mrs. Kennedy brought out a more-than-capacity crowd for

the Friday session of its stay at the District National Guard Armory," stated the Chronicle's report from Nov. 10, 1961. "A promise from Show President Harvey Spear that 'public support has insured [sic] that the Washington International will become a permanent fixture here.' "

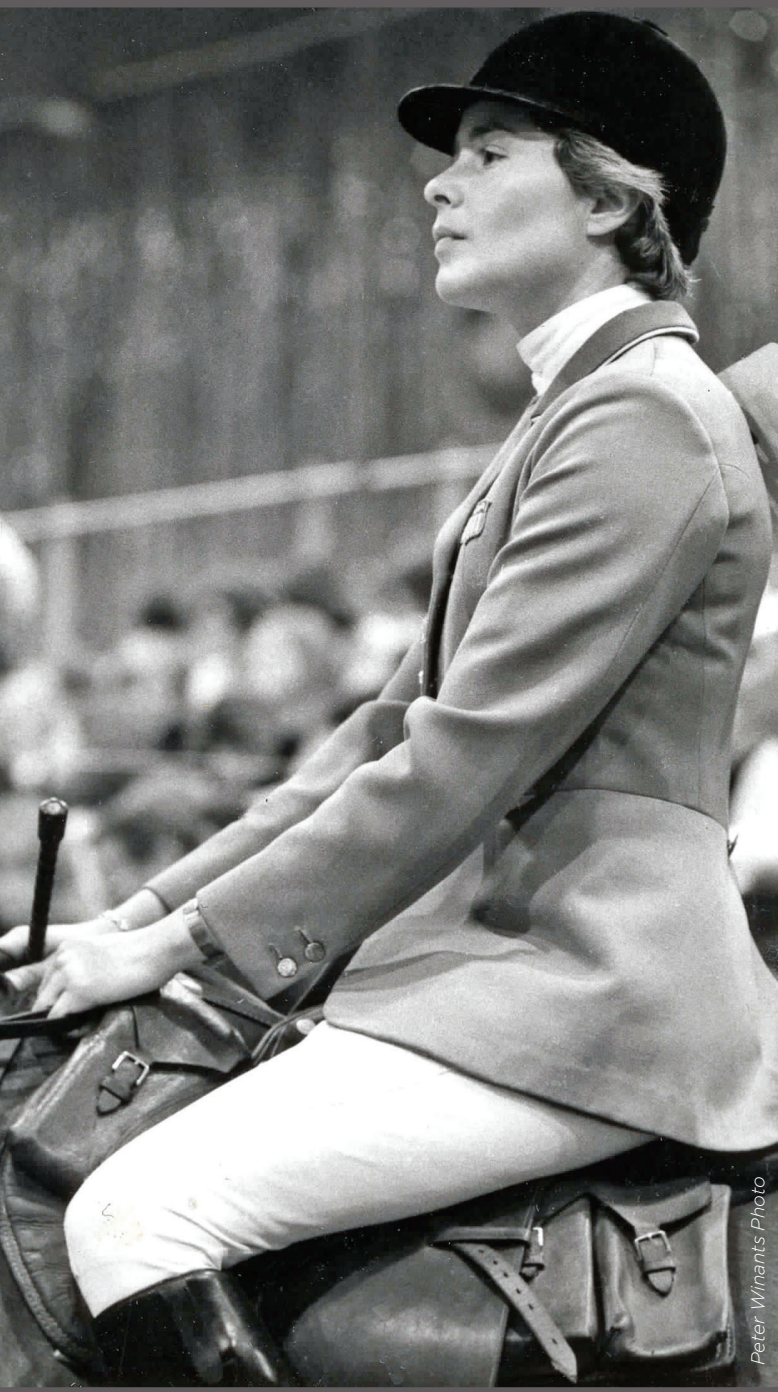
Besides its cancellation in 1964 due to the Tokyo Olympic Games, the Washington International became just that fixture, with the Chronicle first using the term "the big three" in 1966. With hunters performing during the day, jumpers took center stage at night, tackling the infamous puissance class, the International Cup, which pitted nations against each other, and the grand finale President's Cup Grand Prix. In 1973, the WIHS earned Fédération Equestre Internationale status to host Nations Cups.

But it wasn't just about hunter/jumpers then. Arabians, Appaloosas, Morgans, western and gaited horses also took their turns around the Amory. In addition, the show held a Hunt Night, offering side-saddle, gentleman's hunter hacks and hunt team competitions, which later became the final bookend for the Foxhunters Championship Series.

George Axt Photo



After winning team gold at the 2008 Hong Kong Olympic Games with Sapphire, McLain Ward returned to the Washington International that fall to earn victory with the mare in the \$100,000 President's Cup Grand Prix CSI-W on the 50th anniversary of the show.



Peter Winants Photo



Al Cook Photo

Olympic show jumper Kathy Kusner, photographed here in 1974, became a crowd favorite and frequent winner at the Washington International Horse Show, and she was inducted into the show's hall of fame in 2017.



Exhibitions decorated the week-long event every year, including appearances by the Budweiser Clydesdales, actress and socialite Zsa Zsa Gabor riding the \$1 million Tennessee Walker stallion Silver Fox and star race horse Kelso. In the early years, a horse-drawn carriage was sent to the White House to fetch the first lady for an evening of competition.

The competitors knew their duties too. “Yes, our primary objective is always to win,” said show jumper Ian Millar, “but we also know we’re here to entertain the audience, give a show and fill the stands.”

While it still had its hiccups—like the time the show decided to be adventurous with green footing in 1973, or when the Black Stallion slipped on the dance floor and urinated on the carpet during the formal Washington International party in 1981—the show survived even when it moved outside its downtown location in 1975 to the Capital Centre after construction of new metro stops encroached on its original space.

“The decision to move from the D.C. Armory to the new super Capital Centre in Largo, Md., had to be the best choice made in years,” stated the Chronicle’s report published Nov. 21, 1975. “Reports have it that attendance more than doubled throughout the week, and entries more than tripled. The use of the telescreen in the middle of the arena (overhead) gave the entire show a new dimension.”

The WIHS stayed in Maryland for 25 years, holding its first World Cup qualifier for show jumping in those years as well as adding the U.S. League Final for World Cup Dressage in 1991 and the WIHS Equitation Challenge in 1992.

But in 1999, the Capital Centre, by that time called the USAir Arena, was closed and slated for demolition. Without a space for 2000, the show’s organizers initially contemplated holding half of the event in downtown D.C., and the other half in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, at the Prince George’s Equestrian Center. In late 1999, the show’s board of directors settled on returning



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Budd Photo

the competition to its downtown roots, cutting down the entry list by 25 percent but raising the prize money.

For its 2000 edition, the show moved to the MCI Center (which later changed its name to the Verizon Center and is now called the Capital One Arena), not far from the Washington Monument and U.S. Capitol.

“While there are complexities in producing an urban show with shipping horses in and out of the city and closing city streets to create stables, it also makes us one of the most exciting horse shows in the country,” said WIHS Chief Operating Officer Anthony Hitchcock in 2011.

Despite the end of Hunt Night at that competition and the Nations Cup and dressage competitions falling to the wayside, the Washington International Horse Show has maintained relevancy as other historical metropolitan horse

shows have struggled in the 21st century. Every year riders discuss—and enjoy—the unique challenges of housing their horses in temporary stalls on city streets and warming up in a basement ring littered with pillars.

“It’s great to be here in the city,” said Olympic and World Equestrian Games gold medalist McLain Ward, son of Barney Ward, in 2010. “It gives us a real electric atmosphere, and I feel this is still a prestigious grand prix to win in this country.”

With its USEF Heritage Competition status now in place, WIHS still closes F Street for a week every October. Even though the puissance isn’t the most popular class for competitors these days, show organizers erect a tan wall on Friday nights, transporting the horse world back in time. And 35 years later, fans come to cheer and see if that 7’ 7 ½” record can be broken. 🍷





Photo Courtesy: The Washington International Horse Show

Above: The Washington International made the move back to downtown Washington, D.C., in 2000 to the MCI Center, now called the Capital One Arena, where the show is hosted again this year from Oct. 23-28.

Left: The 1961 Washington International Horse Show boasted a full house for the President's Cup Grand Prix as the show started to turn around its poor financial situation.