

Wednesday-Thursday



Riding is a lot of fun for this light-blue ribbon winner.

Jack Graves

Every Rider Is a Leadline Winner

BY SUSAN SAITER

What could be a more adorable sight than a tyke on a pony? How about a tyke on a pony waving a blue ribbon?

The Grand Prix Ring was a sea of blue ribbons and jolly 2-to-7-year-olds on Sunday morning, when the leadline classes kicked off the Classic. And — everyone was a winner.

The unenviable position of being the one to select the most talented rider from each group of 10 that enters the ring has been filled for many years by Joe Fargis, a three-time Olympic gold medalist who lives in Southampton and Middlebury, Va. To be sure, some of the littlest prize-takers stood out a bit more than the others. While everyone gets a light blue ribbon, the chosen few take home a dark blue one that launches them into a championship "hack-off" among the first-place winners in each of the sections. Eighty-two children took part.

This year's overall winners were Lilly Hymowitz of New York and Blackie in the 2 to 4-year-old division, and Madeline Briggs of Southampton riding her small pony, Pippi Longstocking, in the 5 to 7-year-old group.

Skeptics may wonder how much talent can really shine in a 2-year-old being led by a trainer, Mom or Dad, or sometimes even Grandma or Grandpa. "I can assure you that Joe generally picks the best rider," said Kate Robertson, the longtime "hostess" of the event. "And he tries not to be distracted by cute things like pretty hair ribbons."

The younger riders show their mastery at a walk. Five to 7-year-olds perform a posting trot, and Fargis checks closely to make sure they are on the correct diagonal.

With so many entrants, many of whom can't read or ride a bicycle, and their proud families, crowd control is the key, according to Hank Codding, the in-gate steward for eight years. Before he came aboard, the competitors all went into a small ring together. At times, mass chaos threatened. Mr. Codding and Ms. Robertson came up with the idea of sending in 10 competitors at a time and got leadline moved to the "holy ground," as Ms. Robertson calls the Grand Prix Ring.

"I have been judging this event for over 20 years. I feel it is my duty to give back," said Fargis. He had high praise for the Classic as a place to start a riding career. "The footing is great, and the course designer is great. What more could you ask for?"

Fargis himself was the big winner on Sunday. He was first in the \$20,000 David Yurman Time Challenge that afternoon on his third mount in the challenge, Diams III, taking home \$6,000 of the prize money, while the rest goes to Diams III's owner, Mary B. Schwab of Oeji Farm.

Mr. Codding said patience was his most important virtue for this event, because trainers and parents deluge him with requests. "I keep a fresh eraser on my pencil and try to keep people — kids and especially parents — calm," Mr. Codding said.

"Most of the kids don't really care if they win the championship," Mr. Codding said, "because they're just having fun." However, he said that didn't always go for the rest of the family. "We try to keep them in a special area, but it isn't always easy."

"Some parents get terribly nervous," Ms. Robertson said. "And if their children win, they act as if they'd won \$100,000."