



JORDAN: *World-Class Competition* AT A COUNTY FAIR

By Susan Carter

Spectators hear a low and looming rumble. They turn their heads toward the showground as powerful teams surge into the arena pulling historic replicas of freight wagons. The crowd can literally feel the earth quake as the massive hitches pass by. These impressive sights and sounds signal the start of draft horse competition at the Scott County Fair in Jordan, Minnesota—one of the largest county fair draft horse shows in North America.

World-Class Competition

What started as a small, respectable draft horse show in Jordan, Minnesota,

blossomed into an event to rival the most prestigious shows in the nation. With three horse barns, an ample staging area for warm up, halter and hitch rings and a convenient on-site trailer parking area, the Scott County fairgrounds attract and accommodate an international representation of draft horse exhibitors.

This all-inclusive annual event receives regular participation from the four major draft horse breeds: Belgians, Clydesdales, Shires and Percherons. More than 250 head of North America's top draft horses gathered for the 2014

show, proudly representing a broad range of recurring participants from Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah and Wisconsin, as well as Manitoba, Canada.

As Scott County celebrates its 100th fair in July 2015, the draft horse show promises to be a highlight for exhibitors and spectators alike.

"If you build it..."

The Scott County Fair started in 1915 and was considered a success with more than 350 agricultural entries. The

following year, the number of exhibits increased by nearly fivefold, space was added to accommodate the growth, and the fair had made its mark on the community as “the” place to be. By year-end of 1941, the Scott County Fair was debt-free, with each succeeding year breaking new attendance records. In the late 1940s, the event was extended from three to four days, and finally to its current five-day span.

The fair had hosted a small draft horse show for many years, yet every successful show needs dedicated enthusiasts to champion its growth; the Scott County Fair had a family of them.

In the early 1990s, Dick Ames, a Jordan resident and Scott County Fair Board member, along with his brothers and business partners, Butch and Ron, resumed the family’s tradition of showing and exhibiting Percheron horses at various county fairs and shows throughout the United States and Canada. As their interest grew, the Ames brothers wanted to help revitalize the local draft horse show held at the Scott County Fair.

Up until that time, draft horses were housed alongside the cattle. The Ames brothers convinced the Board that the adage, “If you build it, they will come” would indeed be true for the draft horse competition, and encouraged an investment in the expansion of the facilities.

The Board approved construction of a new barn specifically for the draft horses



Showing at Jordan is a tradition for many exhibitors including Treasa Springett, Rush River Percherons, Ellsworth, Wisconsin.

and, to offset the costs, the structure would be rented for boat storage during the winter. Dick Ames promised to fill the barn by personally inviting some of the best draft horse hitches from across the country, and construction began in the spring of 1997. The south arena was fenced and expanded to accommodate the massive size of a six-horse hitch performance class. Dick also secured financial sponsors to help support the draft horse premiums to ensure that none of the fair’s budget was used for pay-outs. Completion of the stalls came down to the final week as workers labored long hours to prepare for opening day. The turnout resulted in full capacity. More than 100 head of draft horses arrived that year, coming from eight states, and included fourteen six-horse hitches.

More stalls were added in an existing nearby barn. The fair kept building and the participants kept coming. In 2000 and 2001, additional tents were needed to house the ever-growing number of entries. Seeing the great success of the Draft Horse Show, the Fair Board approved building another barn that would mirror the shape of the 1997 barn. The new barn was completed prior to the 2002 event.

Opening day of the 2002 Scott County Fair once again proved that, if you build it, they will come. The three barns now housed more than 275 head of draft horses, from nine different states and four Canadian Provinces. Exhibitors came from as far away as New Mexico, Virginia, and New York, as well as Alberta and Quebec, Canada.

With each passing year, the show elevated its level of competition while word quickly spread of the exceptional hospitality that participants received from the event organizers, the Ames Percheron Farm.

Extraordinary Hospitality Attracts Return Exhibitors

Today, the Scott County Fair Draft Horse Show prides itself on promoting not only competition, but a true sense of comradery among its participants. Make no mistake—the competition is fierce in the ring, with everyone vying to go home with the top awards. Yet the bond of the participants is strong outside of the



Dick Ames, pictured dragging the ring, along with his brothers Butch and Ron, were instrumental in breathing new life into the Scott County Fair draft horse show. Today, it is among the most competitive hitch shows anywhere.

-Stacey Riemer photo

Just the Facts

Each year at the Scott County Fair Draft Horse Show:

- An average of 200-275 head of horses are housed in the well-kept, nicely decorated draft horse barns.
- Private donations fund the more than \$57,000 premium payouts to the draft horse show exhibitors.
- Premiums are paid out to award the top five stall decorations.
- 12-18 open six-horse hitches and 8-13 mare six-horse hitches participate.
- 8-17 open eight-horse hitches participate.
- **2015 Scott County Fair: July 24-26, Jordan, Minnesota.**



Indicative of the level of competition at Jordan, Shining Stars Percherons, Altoona, Iowa, was later crowned the 2014 World Champion Percheron Gelding Six.

arena and the show has become known for its wide family-focused appeal with a genuine home-spun hospitality. "We want this show to stand out as one of the most prestigious competitions to be found anywhere," said Dick. "Just as important, we want every participant to feel welcome here. We appreciate how far some of the exhibitors come to participate, and want to acknowledge that it takes all of us to make the show possible."

A vast spectrum of exhibitors come to the show, from people who enlist professional drivers to family-owned and run operations. Yet, all come to compete and their collective opinions play a big role in the event's evolving schedule. One of the most useful tools to support and shape the event is the annual participant survey. For example, as the trend for mares and geldings to compete against each other began to emerge, the Scott County show organizers tried something new. In

addition to the event's existing separate mare and gelding classes from cart to four-horse hitch, two combined six-horse hitches were added in 2013. Based on survey feedback from exhibitors, the 2014 event schedule included a separate mare and gelding six-horse hitch and a combined supreme six-horse hitch—a change that was well received. The 2015 show will follow last year's event schedule with a full roster of classes that also includes an eight-horse hitch, junior classes, an amateur four and a breed demonstration by the Gypsy Vanner Horse Society.

In addition to acting on exhibitor input, a crew of knowledgeable volunteers is available throughout the entire event to assist exhibitors with everything they need to get in, get settled—and get to the ring on time. With continuous radio communication between ground crew members positioned at the gate, near the barn and from one end of the grounds

to the other, participants can count on the show's staff to keep them informed. This above-and-beyond service has become a welcomed and appreciated benefit for exhibitors.

Exceptional "housekeeping" is also a hallmark of the Scott County Fair Draft Horse Show and it starts with particular attention given to the footing in the hitch arena. A tremendous amount of effort is extended to ensure the footing is meticulously manicured and level. Careful attention is also given to the cleanliness of the stalls and wash racks, and to keeping the staging area available for waiting and warming up the horses.

The Jordan hospitality also includes an element of fun and a spirit of community out of the show ring. To solidify that comradery, all draft horse exhibitors, along with their families and crew, are invited to a dinner hosted by Dick Ames. In 2014, attendance at the

dinner topped 250 with attendees also taking part in the annual post-dinner bean bag tournament and the Leon II Jackpot "Scurry" after Friday night's show.

Spectator Support

The Scott County Fair Draft horse show attracts crowds of people outside of the industry who know little to nothing about horses, yet often travel hours to attend, year after year. For some, it has been a family tradition. For others, the large work horses bring back memories of visiting their grandparents' farm. And many simply appreciate the sights and sounds of these awe-inspiring, stately horses. The tree-shaded seating that lines the hitching ring is usually filled to capacity, with onlookers returning every year to see and cheer on their favorites.

The level of competition at this once small county fair draft horse show surpasses the quality of many state fairs, and rivals its own Minnesota State Fair, held in nearby St. Paul. Today, exhibitors who "go to Jordan" can expect to participate in an extraordinary, prestigious event that has become "the" show to attend in the Midwest, attracting the "best of the best" hitches from all over the United States and Canada.

Exhibitor Premiums

Competition and hospitality of the Scott County Fair Draft Horse Show are complemented by an equally important factor: premiums. The goal of the payout structure is to ensure that everyone who participates is compensated for travel costs. To encourage participation in every standard hitch class, exhibitors are paid a \$1,000 hitching bonus. Here are the details:

- Cart Classes: paid through 8th place
- Team Classes: paid through 8th place, then \$40 participation
- Unicorn Classes: paid through 8th place, then \$75 participation
- Four-Horse Hitch: paid through 8th place, then \$110 participation
- Six-Horse Hitch: paid through 8th place, then \$250 participation
- Eight-Horse Hitch: paid through 8th place, then \$325 participation
- Hitching Bonus: participants in Cart through Eight-Horse are paid a \$1,000 bonus

Example: An exhibitor who participates in Cart through Eight-Horse would receive a minimum of \$1,732.00.

Exhibitors come to Jordan from all points, including Express Ranch Clydesdales, Yukon, Oklahoma, driven by Josh Minshull.



Carey McBride