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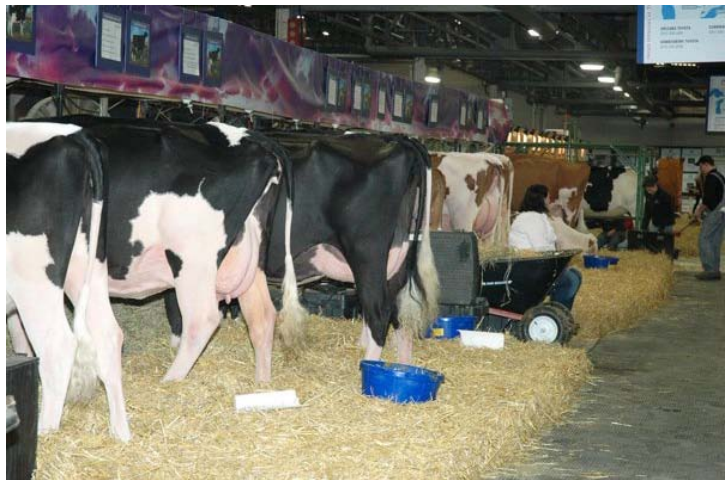


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The scene at the Royal Winter Fair

The original building housing the Royal Horse Show is called the Horse Palace, and it dates back to 1931. At the time of its construction, it was hailed as the finest equestrian facility in the country. Situated within spitting distance of the north shore of Lake Ontario, steps from downtown Toronto, the Horse Palace is now designated as a historic structure, with fine Art Deco features and detailed masonry of horses carved into the exterior. During World War II its two floors of stables served as a barracks and training base for Canadian Army recruits. Today, it also serves as the year-round base of the Toronto Mounted Police unit, 22 horses and some 40 officers strong.

The adjacent coliseum, which was completely renovated in 1995-97 and re-dubbed the Ricoh Coliseum, has hosted agricultural fairs since 1878. The Royal Agricultural Winter Fair was launched in November, 1922, and the National Trade Centre, which more than quadrupled the available space for the fair, was tacked on to the original Horse Palace structure in 1997. For more than 120 years horses and horsemanship have been a feature attraction on these grounds – but while the Royal is an exceptional venue for international jumping competition, that's not ALL it is.

Each year, the Royal pulls out all the stops to 'bring country to the city'. For urbanites, who may or may not be horse-savvy, it's a once-a-year chance to see not only showjumping, but a vast array of horseflesh, from spitfire little Hackney ponies, to earth-shaking six-horse draft teams. The evening competitions, which traditionally have had a 'black tie' dress code, feature a variety of classes every night. Hunters are prominently featured, of course, but so are Welsh ponies under saddle, the speedy, sand-churning roadsters (Standardbreds re-incarnated as show-horses in harness), heavy horses in incarnations from singles to sixes, and the "Green Meadows" coaching division, dripping with tradition and elegance.



beautiful Belgians

The Thursday night show at the Royal has for the past decade or two focused on dressage, with the Grand Prix freestyle (this year worth a cool \$40,000) making this one of the first nights to sell out, every year. A more recent addition is "indoor eventing", a hybrid class of cross-country-style obstacles and knock-down showjumps, designed to give the crowd a little taste of this adrenaline-charged Olympic event and some of the high-profile riders (local and otherwise) who have made the sport their own.

At various times, the Royal has also featured exhibitions ranging from rodeo to dressage quadrilles, circus acts to "mini chucks" (chuckwagon races with teams of adorable Miniature horses tearing around the arena). An indoor carriage-racing derby, which brought the sport of combined driving indoors, was also a popular feature for a number of years.





more from The Royal

If you venture outside the coliseum and the Horse Palace, you might also discover that the Royal Winter Fair is still very much an agricultural fair ... even if you have to wade through an expansive trade fair to find it. On the opposite side of the coliseum from the Horse Palace, is an enormous cattle barn, where the best beef and dairy cattle in North America are shown and auctioned off. There is a goat show, a sheep show, classes for alpacas and llamas and fancy poultry ... and a fruit and vegetable show, which attracts thousand-pound pumpkins and 30-foot-tall stalks of collared kale. Toronto may be a sea of concrete, but its surrounding green belt is rich agricultural land, which is reflected in the entries at the fair. And let's not forget the butter sculptures (<http://royalfair.org/ButterSculpting>).

Educational initiatives are a strong focus of the fair, with the "Spirit of the Horse" ring offering daily lectures and demos of different breeds and disciplines, and projects such as the University of Guelph's EquiMania (<http://www.equimania.ca>), which teaches kids about farm safety and the inner and outer workings of horses. On the days when the school groups visit the Royal, you can barely navigate through the crush of eager kids.





This year's Royal Winter Fair had a number of highlights, from "dressage in the dark" (a quadrille performed in darkness, the riders nearly invisible while the horses were adorned with LED lights from nose to tail) to the bittersweet appearance of Eric Lamaze shortly after the death of his superstar partner, Hickstead. Armbands and black ribbons bearing the stallion's name soon appeared all over the fair as Canada mourned one of its most illustrious stars. It was quickly decided that in future years, the Royal's Wednesday night World Cup class would be known as the Hickstead World Cup Grand Prix – an example of how the RAWF management values its competitors and its audience.

At the age of 89, the Royal has been through a lot of changes. It has had to adapt to the times, but it has done so, for the most part, with the grace and style of a grande dame. And it evidently continues to please the riders. Every year, when I interview the international stars of showjumping there, they confirm that the Royal is a highlight on their calendars. 2011 was no exception. Even in November, Toronto is an unusually hospitable city, and the Royal is one of the reasons why.

More Coverage of The Royal Fair, Toronto, Ontario

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