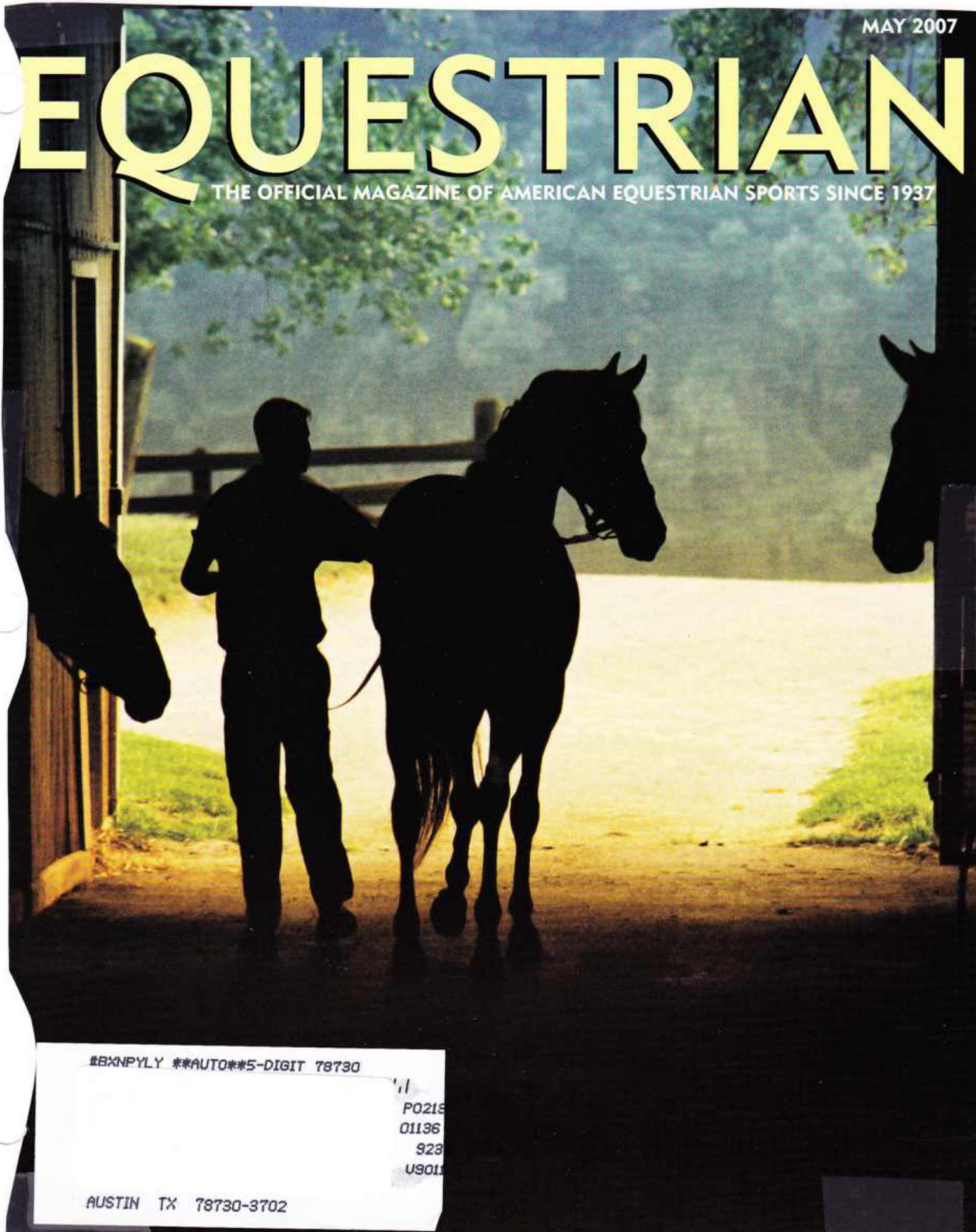


MAY 2007

EQUESTRIAN

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF AMERICAN EQUESTRIAN SPORTS SINCE 1937



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Pin Oak Charity Horse Show Celebrates 62 Years of Glittering Success



LONG REGARDED AS THE "crown jewel" of horse shows in the Southwest and an icon of international prestige, the Pin Oak Charity Horse Show recently completed its 62nd year with a record number of entries and about \$100,000 in donations to the charities it supports—Texas Children's Hospital and Ronald McDonald House of Houston.

But the show's rich history transcends the philanthropic essence of its core. Pin Oak, which this year ran from March 21-April 1, remains one of the few horse shows in the nation to feature a broad variety of breeds and disciplines—including hunter/jumpers (from lead line to grand prix), American Saddlebreds, Andalusians/Lusitanos, Hackneys, Harness Ponies, Welsh ponies and Roadster horses. Conducted over two consecutive weekends at the Great Southwest Equestrian Center near Houston, Pin Oak annually draws several thousand exhibitors and spectators from as close as "just down the road" and as far away as Canada, Mexico, Europe and South America.

"The people here are very friendly, and my horses like it very much," declared Jose Alberto Martinez Barone of Guadalajara, Mexico, winner of the \$30,000 Pin Oak Grand Prix on March 31 (one of two identical events held dur-

ing the shows—the first, on March 24, was won by perennial favorite Tracy Fenney of Flower Mound, TX).

Martinez, who is just 18 and had to leave his trainer behind in Mexico due to a scheduling conflict, bested 38 other top-caliber horses and riders in the class by posting the night's sole double-clear performance aboard Chaco 29. The crowd in the arena's packed stands

Linda Graham and Fontanero and Meagan Riley on Elevado proudly demonstrated the beauty of the Andalusian breed for the crowd during the Pin Oak Parade of Horses.

showed its customary enthusiasm for the winner with thunderous applause and cheers. Afterward, Martinez (who also placed fifth in the event on Orelie) was good-naturedly thrown in the water jump by his fellow competitors. Later, still clutching the winner's trophy and floral bouquet, Martinez posed for photos in the barn aisle with numerous proud relatives who had accompanied him from Mexico.

"The grand prix course was difficult," a shy, smiling Martinez said in his formal English, "and it required good

technique. But my horses are really in shape. I've been training a lot, and they were really good today. I like this horse show very much, and I definitely want to come back."

Martinez's sentiment toward Pin Oak is often shared by international and domestic exhibitors alike. While many Texas barns travel to out-of-state shows for large portions of the year, Pin Oak is the one event where everyone seems to come home to roost.

"Pin Oak is a great place to catch up with riders and trainers that you might not see much during the rest of the year," pointed out jumper rider and Austin resident Jonathan Power, for whom horse showing is a family affair (a common dynamic at the Pin Oak shows). Power's daughter, Hannah, 12, shows in both the hunter and jumper divisions; Rachel, 9, rides in pony hunter; and mom, Meredith, cheerfully manages the clan. "This show is such a big drawing card for the Southwest," added Power, 48, whose family has competed at Pin Oak for six years. "We just like the all-around ambiance, and the prizes are very prestigious."

Rachel, said Power, was thrilled with the children's hunter pony championship she won this year on Hannah's medium pony, Fine Art. "Winning a tricolor at Pin Oak," her dad stated, "or even any color ribbon, is that much more special...because the company you're competing against is the best of the best, at least for this part of the U.S."

Jessica Zienkiewicz agreed. The 23-year-old was excited to win the championship in this year's adult amateur hunter 18-35 division at Pin Oak, riding Taylor Dwyer's Show Stopper. This was only the second Pin Oak show for Zienkiewicz, who in 2004 moved from Colorado to attend Texas State University as a psychology major. She said it's a blend of many elements that makes Pin Oak an exceptional venue—including an overall "vibe" that successfully combines timeless elegance with casual user-friendliness.

"Everything is so beautifully decorated," Zienkiewicz observed. "It's spectator-friendly, and the management and volunteers make a big effort to please everybody. The jumps and all

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the greenery are gorgeous, and the footing in the rings is great.”

Comments like Zienkiewicz's are music to the ears of Lynn Walsh, president of the horse show and a 17-year veteran of Pin Oak volunteerism. An accomplished hunter rider herself, Walsh loves that showing at Pin Oak seems to be such a positive experience for exhibitors of all levels—and for spectators, too.

“We want this horse show to be perceived not as an elitist event,” explained Walsh, “but as accessible entertainment

out there and pull people in from the grassroots level who might not have a multi-thousand-dollar horse, but who still wants to get involved. That's resulted in not only bringing in some amazing sponsors whom we'd have never known about, but new horse show fans, as well. The stands were packed for the grand prix last night, and that's what we'd hoped for. You never know where the next client or fan will come from.”

Community outreach and education also are paramount to Walsh and the non-profit organization. Education Day is each Thursday, during which local second-graders are transported to the horse center and divided into groups for a hands-on experience. The youngsters are escorted down the barn aisles and visit the farrier station; they watch the equine masseuse in action and pet the therapy ponies that make frequent trips to the children's hospital; they ask questions of the veterinarian and learn about jumps from the show's course designer.

“It's wonderful to watch,” Walsh stated, “especially because some of these kids have never been near a horse before. Who knows how many kids will develop a lifelong riding hobby as a result of this exposure?”

Walsh points out that many Pin Oak spectators share a similar unfamiliarity with horses. That's why she goes to great lengths to find announcers like Peter Fenton, who knows how to explain the horse show process to uninitiated crowds at a level that's clear, interesting and non-condescending. “For instance,” Walsh said, “we've got some enormous sponsors

with international scope who have donated incredible amounts of money to our charities, yet who've never been to a horse show before. You want them to understand it as much as possible, because that adds to their enjoyment.

“And that's our number-one goal,” Walsh concluded, “beyond raising money for the charities—that everyone here enjoys themselves as much as possible.”

■ ANNE LANG



Shown: McMillin (?)

Tassie Munroe and Rollingwoods Unequaled became one of the stars during the hunter week when the pair captured Large Pony Hunters.

for everybody. Every year, it gets a little better, a little different. When we hear about something special that they do at another big show somewhere, we try to incorporate that idea, if it makes sense for what we're doing.”

What they're doing is a year-round commitment by nearly 100 volunteers, and just one paid employee (Managing Director Wendy Cook). “Pin Oak has been going on long enough that many of our volunteers are second and third generation,” Walsh said proudly.

“During the year,” Walsh continued, “we try to keep the Pin Oak name

Horse owner Anne Lang is a Texas-based field reporter for People magazine. Lang's daughter, Amy, rides in the junior hunter division at USEF-sanctioned shows.