

# What Aiken Needs Now

By CRAIG THOMPSON

When I sat down to write this piece, the first title that came to mind was “What Aiken Eventing Needs Now.” But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the proposal floating around in my head is bigger than just eventing and bigger than just horses. If developed correctly, it encompasses all of Aiken. What Aiken needs now is an international caliber horse trials that will attract the best horses and riders for a week of competition at the highest level, right here in

Aiken. Think the Masters Golf Tournament, but with Bruce Davidson instead of Jack Nicklaus.

I moved my business (training event horses and riders), to Aiken for the same reasons that so many others have decided to come here. In addition to offering a lovely town and welcoming community, this area is ideal horse country – better, in my opinion, than Middleburg, Va., Southern Pines, NC, or Ocala, FL. We have a great winter circuit of competitions that attracts riders from around the country. We have local horse trials that allow us to compete every weekend and even a few weekdays in February and March. What we don’t have is a big-time event to showcase the area.

Specifically, in my opinion, Aiken needs to host what is known in the trade as a CIC\*\*\* World Cup Qualifier, or more clearly put, an international horse trial at the highest level, Advanced. At the moment,

Aiken hosts every level of competition but Advanced. The basics needed to do so are simple: land and money. We certainly have plenty of beautiful land in the area, which includes the best sand-based turf footing of anywhere I’ve ever been. And I think with a bit of effort we can also come up with the money.

While there is a local winter horse trials circuit in place, I don’t think any of the current horse trials sites or organizers (though each is exceptional at what they do) will ultimately fill this gap. I think, instead, that the land needed, the funding necessary, and the principals involved remain unidentified. I also truly believe that the people needed to make such an event happen will emerge and the funding will develop. Possibly it will be one person who steps forward with the wherewithal to make this vision a reality. Perhaps it will be a combination of private funding and state matching grants. The land might be privately owned; perhaps it will encompass one of the many equestrian developments; or it may turn out to be parkland already at hand. How fun would it be to use Citizens Park on Pine Log Road for the dressage and show jumping? These details will play themselves out over time. At the moment we must simply start the conversation.

A project like this doesn’t happen overnight. An ideal time-frame for an endeavor of this magnitude is not weeks or months, but years. The specific goal should be to have an international horse trials in Aiken in the Spring of 2010, making it a natural part of the lead-up to the 2010 World Equestrian Games which will be held in Lexington, Ky. This is



the scale on which we must think. In 2009 we need to be in a position to host a “test-run” lower-level horse trials on the chosen site. Ultimately, however, Aiken needs to be more than just a nice place to winter, more than a convenient location for local horse sports. Aiken needs to be on the equestrian world stage.

Currently the United States hosts a handful of events comparable to what I propose. The closest example is the Red Hills Horse Trials in Tallahassee, FL, where our best horses and riders perform every February. The city of Tallahassee is intimately involved; the competition is as much about community participation as it is about equestrian competition. Top riders go head-to-head to win a big check and a BMW. The trade fair is large enough to entertain even non-horse enthusiasts. The hotels are full, the restaurants packed. For one week, Tallahassee is the center of the equestrian universe. And Aiken can be, too. Another good example is the Millbrook Horse Trials in Dutchess County, NY, which is run as a benefit for the Dutchess County Land Conservancy and involves the community as participants, vendors, volunteers and spectators. There are plenty of worthy causes right here that could be coupled with an Aiken International Horse Trials. It’s not too far-fetched to think of Aiken playing host to the American Eventing Championships at some point in the future.

The process necessary to move from where we are now to where I propose is not complicated. It has been done before and there is no need to reinvent the wheel. People of means and interest need to step forward. We need a committee, which may at first simply consist of a group of people having dinner and drinks, but which will ultimately evolve into an organizational structure. We need a site, which ideally should be close to town, a bit rolling, partly open and partly wooded. We need a date, which should be either April or September to fit on the competition calendar. And we need funding to staff the project, build jumps, organize sponsors and provide prize money. But it begins with individuals and businesses saying, “I want to be part of that. I can do that.”

There will be vocal opposition to this project, as there always is when ambitious plans challenge the status quo. There will be hiccups and missteps, mistakes and failures along the way. But there will also be the civic pride that accompanies a community’s success in building something bigger than itself, the sporting thrill of the very best challenging themselves to out-do the rest of the field, and the satisfaction of creating something great where there was nothing before.

*Craig Thompson is responsible for starting the Surefire Horse Trials and The Maryland Horse Trials. His website is [www.craigthompstoneventing.com](http://www.craigthompstoneventing.com)*

