

The Mississippi Horse Park...

Diverse Events, Eye on Details Keys to Facility's Success



Marco Nicovich

Mississippi Horse Park manager Bricklee Miller works hard to keep a diverse lineup of events booked at the facility.

8



Submitted

By Bob Ratliff

Tucked away on 100 acres adjacent to Mississippi State University's South Farm is a facility that is much more than its name implies.

The Mississippi Horse Park is home

to dozens of equine events each year, but it also hosts motorcycle events, livestock sales, gospel singings, dog shows and other activities.

"We look for events that are a good fit for the facility and for the local economy," said Bricklee Miller, facility manager at the Horse Park. "It's important that activities at the park be something the whole family can enjoy, and we try to schedule multiday events that will bring people from out of town who will stay at area hotels and visit local restaurants."

The Horse Park opened in 1999 and operates in a partnership that includes Mississippi State University, the city of Starkville and Oktibbeha County. Miller has been the facility manager since 2000. At that time, there had only been 19 events held at the Horse Park, and her first challenge was to pick up the pace.

"I called everyone with a horse show that I could think of, and we held 52 events in 2001," Miller said. "That created a lot

of buzz in the state about the facility, but most were just one-day events. The next challenge was to bring in multiday events that would be more financially beneficial to the Horse Park and the community."

The Horse Park's first major multiday event was the 2001 June Jam. A three-day barrel racing competition, the June Jam has become one of the facility's most successful annual events, attracting hundreds of participants and thousands of spectators each year.

The first event to sell out all of the Horse Park's 350 stalls and all available recreational vehicle spots was a barrel racing futurity in 2003. Barrel racing futurities are for horses that are 4 years old and younger and are among the largest cash payout events held at the Horse Park.

Rodeos are also popular events for the 3,000-seat arena, but Miller is selective about what makes it into the park's busy schedule.

"Once we got our first professional rodeo, we never went back to amateur rodeos, other than our youth and college events," she said. "We're selective because we don't want to saturate the market and also because the people who come to our events expect good quality, and that's what we try to provide."

Quality is a hallmark of the facility, from the catered food service during events to the condition of the arena's dirt floor. The Horse Park's full-time employees total just three: Miller, operations assistant Bryant Howard and staff assistant Paula



Touchstone. However, several MSU students also work part-time to help maintain the facility and during events.

The quality of the facility and the support provided by the Horse Park staff has kept Tod Hammock bringing his Cycle City Promotions arenacross motorcycle event to Starkville each year since 2002.

"We do 15 to 20 events across the southern part of the U.S. each year, and the Mississippi Horse Park is one of the easiest because of the support we get from the management," Hammock said. "Bricklee knows what we need for a successful arenacross event and helps us meet those needs."

Good ventilation, lots of parking and the 85-foot ceiling height that allows riders to jump their motorcycles 40 to 50 feet in the air during the freestyle competition are among the needs for an arenacross event. The Mississippi Horse Park has all of that and more, Hammock said.

"The riders like coming to Starkville because of the facility and the way it's managed and because of the town and the good spectator turnout for our event," he said

During any event, Miller and her staff are behind the scenes making sure the individuals in charge of the event have the resources they need, checking to see that parking is going smoothly, answering questions for spectators and taking care of dozens of other details that go into a successful event for participants and an enjoyable experience for visitors.

Miller's eye for the small details and her skill at long-range planning are paying off for both the Horse Park and the surrounding community.

"Last year, the economic impact of the Horse Park on the local economy was more than \$2 million, and the projection for 2007 is close to \$3 million," Miller said. "About 90 percent of the people who come to events are from at least 90 miles away,

and we'll have an estimated attendance of about 60,000 for events in 2007."

Terry Long, manager of Harvey's Restaurant in Starkville, said he checks the Horse Park's schedule to see what types of events are coming up.

"We do see increased business when the Horse Park has its barrel racing and other medium- and large-size multiday events, so we plan for the larger crowds," he said.

The Horse Park received the 2006 Starkville Convention and Visitors Bureau's Tourism Award for its efforts in bringing visitors to the area.

Community service is also part of the Horse Park's mission. The facility is home to the MSU 4-H therapeutic riding program, and the facility provided shelter for horses and their owners forced to flee coastal areas during hurricanes Katrina and Ivan. The Horse Park also hosts a variety of MSU meetings, banquets and other activities each year.

Miller is planning ahead to find new events to diversify the Horse Park's already successful lineup.

"This year, we've had 35 percent new business, and we're always looking for new things," she said. "We're going to have a monster truck event, which we haven't had for several years, and we're working with the Kennel Club of Mississippi on a show with about 300 dogs from across the country. I'm also exploring the possibility of a remote-control race car event."

The Mississippi Horse Park has come a long way in its eight years in operation, and Miller, herself an avid horse enthusiast and barrel racer, said the facility itself and its location adjacent to Starkville and Mississippi State are part of the formula for success.

"Every facility has a market, and we have found ours and are working to expand it," she said. "I never thought it would not succeed."



Jim Lytle