

FRIENDS OF THE CONGRESS REINING

The sport of reining, an international phenomenon in the horse industry, began with humble beginnings in the heartland of America, Ohio.

A state where countless legendary horsemen call home, reining was born in 1966 in a small living room in Coshocton, Ohio. The first NRHA (National Reining Horse Association) Futurity was held in Columbus, Ohio at the Ohio Expo Center. A year later the first All American Quarter Horse Congress opened its gates for the first annual event, inviting

Reining continued at Congress and became the Congress Reining Futurity while the official NRHA Futurity coined Oklahoma State Fairgrounds as its new home.

Despite great reining trainers building quality reining training facilities in Ohio, the sport of reining continued to pull more and more interest away from the East Coast, being replaced by the central and western horizons of the United States.



the NRHA Futurity to join the show. For the next nineteen years, the Congress and the NRHA Futurity grew hand in hand in exhibitor numbers, popularity and in quality horseflesh.

In 1986, NRHA moved from Ohio to Oklahoma City, a more central location for the sport swiftly taking the nation, and the world by storm.

In the late 2000s, reining enthusiasts Bob Santagata, owner of Santa Hill Ranch in New York and Rick Clark, former president of NRHA, began discussing the task of bringing the reining enthusiasm back to the East Coast. After discussing various options, Santagata and Clark among other top NRHA industry contributors started a dialogue with the All American Quarter Horse Congress Tri-



BRING REINING TO THE TOP AT THE CONGRESS

By: Barbara Aitken Jenkins

Chairmen (the decision makers of the Congress) about restructuring the reining portion of the show and building it into one of the leading NRHA destinations in the world.

In 2013, Beth Himes, past president of NRHA who is an Ohio native and was also a member of the Ohio Quarter Horse Association Board of Directors signed the alliance partnership between OQHA and NRHA. In 2014 the Friends of the Congress Reining, a group of donors specifically designed to sponsor the reining portion of the Congress, and add money to the Congress Futurity was born.

Needless to say, since the Friends of the Congress Reining's inception, the amount of growth in the Congress reining has been exponential which has caused the Congress Futurity to become the largest "pre Futurity" in the country.

In its fourth year, at the 2017 Congress, over \$140,000 has been raised for the Congress Futurity and ancillary NRHA classes.

Much thanks to money raised go to the dedication of sponsors such as Bob Santagata and Rick Clark. With 45 sponsors, the Congress reining is now being marked on the map as one of the most prestigious reining shows in the world.

Santagata notes, "The guys from Texas are coming, even the guys from California are coming to show." He also reminisced on the first year of the Friends of the Congress, describing the competition as



"okay" than jumping to his thoughts on the 2016 Futurity finals.

"Three years ago, you could make a mistake in the prelims and still make it back to the finals. Last year, you needed to mark high in order to get back into the finals. The competition is really tough now, and we think it's going to be even tougher in 2017." Clark is really proud of the work he and Santagata have done in regards to the growth of the reining at the Congress. However, they are far from finished.

“The reining industry has so much to offer the horse industry as a whole,” stated Clark. The Friends of the Congress Reining partnership is only the beginning between OQHA and NRHA. Santagata added, “We’re far from done. There is still a lot more to do.”

The presence of the Friends of the Congress Reining has not only restructured the look of the Congress Futurity but also the entire face of reining at the Congress. In fact, due to the rapidly growing reining entries, the Congress added two days to the over all schedule to accommodate large classes.



In addition, the Congress Futurity finals have been moved from a Tuesday night to Saturday night. As the discipline at the forefront of the western riding industry, NRHA Past President and Market Insurance Director of Western Disciplines, Frank Constantini believes that the industry will continue to get behind the reining at the Congress. For Clark, the incentives for showing at the Congress dive deep.

“Showing that the Congress gives great exposure when you walk into the pen. If you are lucky enough to walk away with that infamous Bronze trophy it’s even better.”

Despite whether a rider walks out on the top, Clark is a believer in the satisfying feeling of being

competitive at a show like the Congress. “It’s a hard show to win at. It’s a great experience.” Coupled with the already presence of the Congress prestige, the facility in itself is reason enough to come compete.

Santagata described the new addition of the Adaquan barn built in 2015 as possibly the best barn in the nation. Along with the conjoining warm up pen, the facilities at Congress allow an easy experience for reining exhibitors.

The Congress experience is even more heightened now for the both reining exhibitors and spectators thanks to the Saturday night Futurity finals on October 7th, which encourages an elite atmosphere for everyone in attendance.

Karen Shedlauskas, who aids Santagata and Clark with the everyday operations for the Reining at the Congress, applauded the two men by calling them, “incredible businessmen”, who are “fun to work with.” She added, “The word “no” is not in their vocabulary. They are goal oriented men who get results.”

Anyone who is involved with the Friends of the Congress Reining can only imagine the reining at the Congress will continue getting bigger and bigger in years to come.

“Last year, we had 800 out of the 1000 stalls in the Adequan barn filled. This year we expect even more,” said Shedlauskas.



Santagata and Clark both discussed the hopes that in years to come, the added money they have been diligent in raising the past four years, will become a self-sustaining part of the show.

Clark shared that the goal is to have 3-5% increase in exhibitors each year. “It gets a little more exciting every year.”

“We want a reining that is a big force in the East,” explained Santagata. “Now is the time to do it, and the Congress has all of the values [reiners] want in a horse show.”

Given the growth of the reining at the Congress in the last four years, coupled with the promising outlook for the future, Santagata and Clark among the other members of the Friends of the Congress Reining, cannot help but have a sense of satisfaction with what they have been able to build. The Congress looks forward to the continued partnership with the Friends of the Congress Reining and is excited to see the reining continue to grow in the state where it all began.

