



Photo by Andrew Craft

an Roberts rides Napalm in the cross-country part of the Southern Pines Horse trials at Carolina Horse Park last year

Nothing compares to the thundering hooves that kick up sand and flecks of grass in their wake. Sinewy muscles pull and stretch under a sheen of coarse hair; the coat catches and holds the sunlight with each fresh burst of adrenaline. And when the racehorse takes a leap of faith, beast and jockey are boldly suspended in time while onlookers hold their breaths.

It's a sport of athletic dependency between horse and man, and one that has been somewhat mistakenly pinned as elitist. For those living in the Carolinas, visiting a world-renowned race course is right around the bend. The time-honored tradition that welcomes the budding sweetness of spring is not just for horse enthusiasts anymore. It's for family.

The Carolina Horse Park in Raeford has something both for horse enthusiasts and those who boast that they went to the races and never saw a saddle. This vast stretch of land, covered in pine forest and track, is a frequent stop for world-champion riders. The park features some of the best footing for horses in the country; the sandy terrain is perfect for fast-paced performance. The public is invited to the Southern Pines Horse Trials March 25-27. It is the first stop on the national Professional Riders Organization circuit tour, and the event challenges each horse and jockey pairing for three days.

About 400 horses and

300 riders are expected to attend the horse trials. But the biggest crowds are expected at next month's Stonybrook Steeplechase. This racing event began six decades ago in Southern Pines, and the 60th annual steeplechase is taking place April 9. Five or six titles are for the taking with \$50,000 in purse money up for grabs. Athletes are there to make a name for themselves and their horses. Families are there to enjoy a day in the country. Many have been going for years. Others have never seen a horse in person.

"People were hanging of the rail and saying they had never been that close to a horse," said Jane Murray, executive director of the Carolina Horse Park. "The power and the noise, it gave them chills."

Take in the tailgating scene, and it's clear that steeplechase racing brings together all backgrounds. Champagne flutes to coolers of beer, tailgating can be more colorful than the jockeys' outfits.

"It's going from one subculture to a different one when you go all the way around the track," Murray said.

A similar scene can be found down the road in Camden, S.C. The Carolina Cup has been continuously running since the 1930s, save for a few years during World War II. Steeplechase horse racing is deeply embedded in the small town's Southern culture, one that is rich with Civil War history. More than 60,000 travel to the Springdale Race Course each year to watch thoroughbreds and their

"We are, in essence, the Derby of the South," said Teri Leigh Teed, assistant director of the Carolina Cup Racing Association. "People have been coming for generations. Some people have had the same parking spaces and grandstand boxes for generations."

The European-style Springdale Race Course is home to two major races, the Colonial Cup in the fall and the Carolina Cup. The 79th Carolina Cup will be held April 2, and it is the second race on the national steeplechase circuit. Six races will kick off throughout the day.

The executive director of the Carolina Cup Racing Association is no stranger to the thrill of the ride. Jeff Teter is a former championship rider who claimed the Colonial Cup in 1996.

interested in the technical side of racing to those just wanting to enjoy a sunny day. College kids from the University of South Carolina in Columbia throw Frisbees and crack open cold cans of beer. The infield is where families gather to tailgate. Corporate sponsors and an older crowd watch by the grandstand.

"People have been penned up inside in cold weather, and football season's over and basketball season is kind of coming to an end," Teter said, "so they're kind of chomping at the bit to do something outside."

Another tradition partnered with racing is flaunting spring styles. All eyes are on the elaborate outfits worn by horse-racing fashionistas. Women sport the traditional wide-brimmed hats and bright-colored, knee-length dresses. The

Lilly Pulitzer dresses this year.

"You can see everything, from blue jeans to Guccis," Teed said.

One of the most fascinating parts of steeplechase racing is observing the horse and jockey before the race. As they wait in front of the grandstand, trainers get their jockeys focused for the competition as groomers ensure the horse is relaxed and ready. As the rider heaves himself up and onto the massive beast, the contrast is startling. The man seems fragile compared to the animal's enormous frame. They trot to the starting point as the jockey inhales deep breaths, fingers laced in the reins, for better or for worse. And then the flag waves. ☆

Trials | March 25-27

Carolina Horse Park in Raeford. Free for spectators. carolinahorsepark.com

The Carolina Cup | April 2

Springdale Race Course in Camden, S.C. Gates open 9 a.m. Post time at 1:30 p.m. Tickets available online at carolina-cup.org or (800) 780-8117.

60th Stoneybrook Steeplechase | April 9

Carolina Horse Park in Raeford. carolinahorsepark.com or (910) 875-2074 to buy tickets and reserve tailgate spaces.



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