

MSU Celebrates 100 Years of Purebred Horse Breeding at Great Lakes International With Special Awards, Return to Show Ring

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EAST LANSING, Mich. -- As the thundering sound of massive hooves hitting the ground reverberates against the walls of the Michigan State University (MSU) Pavilion for Agriculture and Livestock Education during the 31st annual Michigan Great Lakes International (MGLI) draft horse show Oct. 18-21, horse enthusiasts can reflect on memories generated from 100 years of purebred horse breeding on the MSU campus.

To celebrate this milestone, several special events are planned, including 100th anniversary commemorative halter class awards, an ice cream social, and a return to the show ring for the MSU horse program.

This year marks the first time since the 1946 American Belgian Show that draft horses from the MSU program have been exhibited. Seven MSU students from the advanced draft horse class will exhibit the university's five teaching horses -- two Belgians and three Percherons -- as their final exam assignment.

"The students will be responsible for getting the horses ready to show," says Cara O'Connor-Robison, MSU draft horse coordinator. "This includes decorating manes and tails, harnessing, hitching the horse up to the cart or wagon, and driving. The students are very excited."

In the early 1900s the university established purebred breeding programs for working horse breeds, including Clydesdales (1907), Percherons (1908) and Belgians (1918). Except for a hiatus that lasted 36 years -- from 1963 when the last of MSU's draft horses left the university until 1999 when Ilona and Mark Stewart donated a team of Belgians -- draft horses have played a role in the history of the MSU horse program.

“MSU has had some phenomenal draft horses over the years,” O’Connor-Robison says. “Back when MSU was still known as the Michigan Agricultural College (M.A.C.), breeding stock was promoted by competing in halter classes at shows all across the Midwest.”

The M.A.C. breeding program was very successful and known as one of the best collegiate stables in the country. Between 1910 and 1930, its draft horses won 211 firsts and 155 championships at state fairs and international competitions.

“One of the Belgians we own today traces back to the mare Pervenche that came here in 1922,” O’Connor-Robison adds. “Pervenche won her first grand championship at the International Livestock Expo in Chicago in 1923 as a two-year-old and won again in 1924. She was praised by many as the complete draft horse.”

As part of the anniversary celebration, an exhibit will be on display from the MSU Museum highlighting the history of the MSU horse program. It includes period pieces from 1907 to 1963 and two leather harnesses trimmed in brass with the M.A.C. logo.

O’Connor-Robison says that 100th anniversary hats will be available for purchase at the MGLI. Proceeds from hat sales will benefit the MSU draft horse endowment fund, which when fully funded will ensure that draft horses will remain on campus as long as there is livestock. Hats can also be purchased during an ice cream social scheduled for Oct. 18 near where the MSU horses are stalled. Information on the MSU draft horse endowment fund will also be available.

“People are invited to attend an ice cream social celebrating this special occasion on Thursday night,” she says. “It will take place at the conclusion of the evening performance and anyone who is attending the show is invited to come.”

Billed as North America’s finest and largest draft horse event, the MGLI attracts more than 1,000 head of Belgian, Clydesdale and Percheron draft horses and nearly 300 exhibitors from across the Midwest and Canada. The annual show consistently draws crowds totaling nearly 36,000 during the event’s four-day run and brings in an estimated \$900,000 of revenue to local hotels, restaurants and businesses. The MGLI is the only event of its kind in the world to feature halter, cart and hitch classes and plowing and pulling competitions for draft horse breeds and mules at the same location.

Single day and full package MGLI tickets can be purchased on-site. Children age 7 and under are free and senior citizens receive a discount. There are no advance ticket sales. To learn more about the MGLI and to download a complete schedule of events and ticket prices, visit www.mgli.org.

The MSU Pavilion for Agriculture and Livestock Education was made possible with funding from the Animal Agriculture Initiative (AAI), Michigan's animal agriculture research, teaching and Extension initiative at MSU.

The MSU horse breeding program is part of the MSU Department of Animal Science. The department embodies a 100-year tradition of educating outstanding students, providing excellence in research and engaging communities through Extension activities.

To learn more about Michigan's Animal Agriculture Initiative at MSU, visit www.animalag.msu.edu. For more information on the MSU Department of Animal Science, call (517) 355-8383 or visit www.ans.msu.edu.

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