



A conversation with **SUMMER BEST**
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE FOUNDATION FOR THE FLORIDA HORSE PARK

There is horse power and more at the Ag/Equine Business of the Year, The Florida Horse Park

Q: The Florida Horse Park, officially named the Florida Agriculture Center and Horse Park Authority, encompasses 500 acres, carved out of the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway...right here in Ocala. Can you tell us a little background about the park and what it represents to our community?

The conceptualization for the Florida Agriculture Center and Horse Park was a long-time dream of many involved in the Ocala/Marion County Chamber of Commerce's Ag/Equine Committee; their hard work came to fruition in 1996 when the park was confirmed into Florida state statute.

In the years since, the park's board of directors, all of whom are approved by Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services, have led the park's progress and growth as an international-level facility for a plethora of equine shows and events, as well as unlimited opportunities for Floridians and visitors to enjoy hiking, biking, trail riding, picnics, RV shows, BBQ cook-offs, dog races and dog luring contests...you name it. The park is really the ultimate destination for outdoor activities and eco-tourism – right here in our own backyard.

Q: You mentioned that the park is not just for equestrian events?

Many people highlight us for our horse shows and events – which are critical to our business model and to the charm and infrastructure of Florida and Ocala/Marion County - Horse Capital of the World®. Ocala/Marion County has more horses and ponies than any other US county, according to the most recent USDA Census. The park's current economic impact studies, created by Policom, show the park's economic impact on Marion County and surrounding areas documented at \$15.1

million per year. That obviously influences tourism/hotel stays, restaurants, all businesses and every single consumer product that our friends need when they visit Marion County.

To focus on a quick, conservative perspective, consider this: for a multi-day equine competition at the park that attracts 400 horses – every horse brings a team of at least three people, not to mention spectators, vendors, volunteers and event management. The multiplier from this: the Florida Agriculture Center and Horse Park is a stalwart economic contributor, thanks to the equine industry and our area's horse-friendly charm, history and culture.

But, you're right, there's more to the story. In the past several months alone, we have hosted band concerts and triathlons, BBQ cook-offs, Jack Russell Terrier races, a legislative luncheon and trail ride for local, state and U.S. officials, an American Bald Eagle release with Audubon of Florida, and a menagerie of fun, family-friendly activities. We're looking to continually grow these opportunities for both Marion County and all visitors.

Q: What is the role of the Foundation for the Florida Horse Park?

The Foundation for the Florida Horse Park was created specifically to support the activities and development of the Florida Agriculture Center and Horse Park. I was hired as its first employee in July 2011 to move this mission forward, and we've been working in a great, complementary nature with our local community, state, sponsors, and user groups to be successful.

Right now, we have a great facility. But with planned, fiscally and environmentally responsible growth and structures – such as a covered arena and more per-

manent barns, one at a time – the park has an opportunity to bring considerable additional jobs, economic impact and prestige to our area.

Q: What's your biggest challenge?

In order to grow...in order to continue development that ultimately benefits our community, our state and even the horse industry...we do seek continued funding. The park survives on event income, donations, and sponsorships. We have not, to date, received state support, with the exception of one grant several years ago. It's a big facility; it operates on a pretty short shoestring, and with the help of many, many wonderful volunteers and supporters. We can always use help in the categories of time, talent and treasure.

Q: What's next for the park?

The park's future build-out is planned and engineered, literally, with a beautiful comprehensive master plan designed by one of the world's most recognized equine facility designer/architects. We've ramped up our efforts to bring in new events by hiring a new event coordinator, Ellen Ettenger, who just began part-time work. Our new executive director, Shawn Doherty, has been on staff for just a few weeks, and his experience and enthusiasm for the park are a great fit. The future looks good for our area and for our industry. We do need consistent involvement from those who would like to be involved. It's fun, it's big, and it's a good thing. Call, click or come see us! (M)

Jaye Baillie,
 President and CEO

