

**Virginia Horse Center Foundation**  
**May 9, 2014**

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**FORMER KENTUCKY HORSE PARK LEADER NICHOLSON JOINS VIRGINIA HORSE CENTER MANAGEMENT TEAM**

John Nicholson, the former executive director of the Kentucky Horse Park, has joined the management team of the Virginia Horse Center Foundation (VHCF) as a consultant. Nicholson's 17-year tenure represented the longest-serving executive director of the Kentucky Horse Park in its 35-year history, and he served at its helm during its greatest period of growth – garnering world-wide recognition for the facility.

"We are very excited that John is joining our team," said Ernie Oare, the president of VHCF. "We identified him in March as someone with the necessary background to play a key role in our ongoing plans to bring the Horse Center back to local, industry and financial prominence."

"It is a privilege to be a part of one of the most prestigious equestrian facilities in North America. I am very excited to be working with Ernie Oare, Glenn Petty and the entire leadership team of the Virginia Horse Center. It is an honor to be working with people of this caliber. I believe we will be successful in our efforts and I'm optimistic about the future of the Virginia Horse Center," said Nicholson.

Nicholson retired April 30 following one of the Horse Park's signature events – the Rolex Three Day Event – and traveled to Lexington, Virginia this week to meet with Oare and interim executive director Glenn Petty.

"I'm looking forward to working with John and having access to his wealth of knowledge about managing a similar facility. He has already been helpful by simply sharing his wide range of experiences. When he agreed to join the VHCF team, I felt like a coach who had landed an all-star recruit," Petty said.

Nicholson, and his consulting firm Equine Facility Management (EFM), will be active in VHCF's Executive Committee and Board of Directors in operating the Horse Center and in executing the Center's short-term and long-term business plans. Nicholson will also play a key role in conducting the search for the new permanent Executive Director and other needed personnel.

Nicholson had been in charge of the Lexington, Kentucky facility during its rise to prominence which included hosting the 2010 Alltech World Equestrian Games and the prestigious Rolex Three Day Event. The World Equestrian Games culminated a decade-long effort to plan and recruit the international event which had never been held outside of Europe. Ultimately, the events were televised internationally to 500 million viewers and created an economic impact of \$202.5 million. The Rolex remains the only four star three day event held in the United States.

Under Nicholson's leadership, the Horse Park has been steadily transformed into one of the finest equestrian competition facilities in the world. Nicholson has overseen its expansion to include \$80 million in capital improvement projects, including the 5,500-seat Alltech Arena; the 7,300-seat Rolex Stadium; new stabling barns; a new \$10 million, 8,500-square-foot museum wing; and numerous new buildings within the park's National Horse Center – a collection of national, regional and state equine organizations.

Nineteen of the current 33 National Horse Center tenants have relocated their national headquarters to the park or expanded their offices during Nicholson's tenure.

In addition to growing the park, Nicholson concentrated on improving its public perception and increasing private sector support.

In 2000, the Park hosted "Imperial China: The Art of the Horse in Chinese History." Nicholson led efforts in raising the necessary \$1.2 million from the private sector to fund the exhibition, valued at \$100 million, which was eventually seen by more than 200,000 visitors.

Under Nicholson's leadership, the Horse Park produced two more exceptional international exhibitions, "All the Queen's Horses," in 2003, and "A Gift from the Desert," in 2010.

Nicholson's major accomplishments also include recruiting the prestigious National Horse Show to relocate to the Horse Park from its traditional home of Madison Square Garden in New York City.

He recounts among his favorite memories the funeral of retired champion racehorse John Henry and the successful effort to have the leading money winning racehorse and multiple Horse of the Year Cigar retired to the Hall of Champions at the Park.

Nicholson's relationship with the Kentucky General Assembly led to unprecedented capital investment, followed by a modern roadway system, major infrastructure improvements and, of course, the Rolex Stadium and the Alltech Arena.

Nicholson worked closely with the administrations of Governor Paul Patton, Governor Ernie Fletcher and Governor Steve Beshear, all of whom made extraordinary contributions to the park's growth.

In 2008, Nicholson's leadership led to the park receiving an Eclipse Award, the highest honor in the Thoroughbred industry, from the National Thoroughbred Racing Association, National Turf Writers Association, and the Daily Racing Form. In 2010, he received the prestigious Equine Industry Vision Award from the American Horse Publications, an award that recognizes outstanding leadership, creativity and meritorious contributions in the equine industry, and he accepted the United State Equestrian Foundaton's Sallie Busch Wheeler Trophy on behalf of the Horse Park for distinguished service in equestrian sport. In 2011, Nicholson was named one of the Chronicle of the Horse magazine's "Overall Horsemen of the Year."

Nicholson began his career in 1984, working for Kentucky State Parks. In 1991, he joined the Horse Park as deputy director and was active in the establishment of the Kentucky Horse Council, serving as that organization's president in 1994. He returned from the private sector to the Horse Park in his former position in 1996 until he was named executive director in 1997.

Nicholson has served on many boards of directors, including the Bluegrass Hospitality Association, Bluegrass Sports Commission, Bluegrass Tomorrow, Commerce Lexington, Fayette Alliance, Kentucky Farm Bureau Equine Advisory Committee, Midway College Sports Management Advisory Committee, and ex officio for VisitLEX.

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***The Virginia Horse Center (VHC) hosts over 100 equine events a year. In 2013, VHC provided 51,455 stable nights with an estimated 205,000 guest days and a combined local economic impact estimated at over \$53 million statewide and \$37 million in Lexington and Rockbridge County.***

***The VHC is situated on a 573-acre site with 8 barns to accommodate 750 horses in permanent stabling. Indoor stabling can be increased to 1,200 horses with the use of temporary stalls. VHC hosts 19 show rings, including two large arenas and a five mile Olympic cross country course. Four of the VHC barns are winterized with close access to the 4,000 seat indoor coliseum. VHC is recognized for the excellent footing of its show rings and the durable construction of the concrete stalls. VHC also offers camping facilities and on-site food and beverage services.***

***The VHC plays a key role in the Shows and Competition component of the Equine industry's economic impact estimated at \$95 million+ in 2010 and an overall state and local tax impact of \$65 million (\$37 million+ state taxes and \$28 million+ local taxes). An important part of the industry's economic impact includes the tax dollars of \$2.3 million+ for Rockbridge County and the cities of Lexington and Buena Vista. Much of that tax revenue is attributed to the VHC.***

***(Economic impact estimated by the University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center For Public Service)***