

MAY 2015



Chasing

NATIONAL STEEPLECHASE ASSOCIATION | 400 FAIR HILL DRIVE, ELKTON, MD 21921

Virginia Gold Cup pumps up purses as spring racing season nears end

May marks the conclusion of the National Steeplechase Association's spring racing season, and the Virginia Gold Cup kicks off the month with an action-packed program that includes the 90th running of the Virginia Gold Cup. In honor of the anniversary, the Virginia Gold Cup purse has been increased to \$90,000, making it the year's richest timber race.

The four-mile timber classic on May 2 is by no means the only race with an increased purse. In all, the Virginia Gold Cup meet purses will total \$400,000, a whopping 60% increase over \$250,000 in 2014. The increase places the Virginia Gold Cup right behind the Iroquois Steeplechase as the spring's richest race meet.

The Virginia Gold Cup meet at Great Meadows Race Course in The Plains will offer pari-mutuel wagering for the third consecutive year and will be run under Virginia Racing Commission rules.

For this year's meet, the Virginia Gold Cup created a new race, the \$75,000 David Semmes Memorial, to be run at 2 1/8 miles over National Fences. Mr. Semmes, a well-known member of the Virginia steeplechasing and fox-hunting community, died Jan. 1 at his Indian Run Farm in Flint Hill, Va., at the age of 86.

The former longtime master of the Old Dominion Hounds, he was a National Steeplechase Association member and licensed owner since 1996. He practiced intellectual-property law for 41 years and was best known for the patent work on the "black-box" data and voice recorders used on commercial aircraft around the world. He also performed the patent work on the technology used for jockeys' protective vests.

An amateur jockey, he rode more than 100 races between 1969 and 1986, chiefly in the competitive Seven Corners owner-rider timber series. He was selected for the Francis Thornton Greene Award in 2008 for his years of volunteer service to the industry.



Willie McCarthy drove Holston Hall's Hot Rize to victory in the 2014 Virginia Gold Cup. At season's end, Hot Rize reigned as timber champion, and McCarthy was champion jockey.

DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO

The meet also will offer a \$40,000 Sport of Kings maiden race and a 2 1/2-mile allowance hurdle race worth \$45,000 as part of an eight-race program.

The 74th Iroquois program a week later in Nashville will offer \$415,000 in purses plus \$20,000 in bonuses. The meet at Percy Warner Park will be highlighted by the \$150,000 Calvin Houghland Iroquois (Gr. 1) at three miles over National Fences. Also on the rich card are the \$75,000 Marcellus Frost for novices, the \$50,000 Margaret Currey Henley for fillies and mares, and the \$50,000 Mason Houghland Memorial over timber.

The Radnor Hunt Races in Malvern, Pa., on May 16 will highlight the \$50,000 National Hunt Cup (G3) over National Fences and the \$30,000 Radnor Hunt Cup over timber. The spring season concludes May 23 with the Fair Hill Races in Maryland, where the featured \$30,000 Valentine Memorial will be run as a novice timber stakes.

Other May meets are Block House in Tryon, N.C., on May 2, the Winterthur Races in Wilmington, Del., on May 3, the Willowdale Steeplechase in Kennett Square, Pa., on May 10, and the High Hope Steeplechase in Lexington, Ky., on May 17.



Prominent owner Betty Merck dies at 95

Elizabeth Mead “Betty” Merck, a much-admired steeplechase owner who was both gracious and outspoken, died April 3 at The Fields, her home in Bedminster, N.J. She had celebrated her 95th birthday in January with a party at her home.

In addition to racing The Fields Stable with son George F. “Laddie” Merck, she was a director of the Far Hills Racing Association and a past master of the Essex Fox Hounds in central New Jersey. She also was deeply involved in land-conservation efforts in Somerset County. She had the distinction of having ridden horses in ten different decades and fox-hunted until she was in her 90s.

She had a long association with Mimi and the late Tom Voss, who trained her horses. The Fields was the National Steeplechase Association’s leading owner in 2009, when it won Far Hills’ two leading races, the \$250,000 Grand National (Gr. 1) with Your Sum Man and the Foxbrook Champion Hurdle with Left Unsaid, who took down the year’s novice championship. Among all-time NSA owners, The Fields ranks 18th.

The relationship between Betty Merck and the Voss family dated from 1995. Mrs. Merck said, only half in jest, that her family wanted to get her involved as a steeplechase owner so she would spend less time fox-hunting. The Fields’ first racehorse, Brigade of Guards, won seven races and \$216,269 between 1996 and 1999.

He was bred by Paul Mellon, and Mimi Voss went looking for relatives to purchase. She found his full sister, Distant Drumroll, at Laurel Park with trainer Billy Turner and purchased her in partnership with Mrs. Merck.

Distant Drumroll only won a maiden hurdle, but her value as a broodmare was inestimable. Her best—and the best raced by The Fields—was Guelph, named for a family hometown in Canada. Guelph was the 2005 novice and filly-mare champion, and she repeated as the female champion in 2008. Distant Drumroll also produced Wanganui, who carried The Fields’ silks to victory in the 2011 Gladstone Stakes and reigned as the year’s three-year-old champion.



Betty Merck shared a laugh with emcee Tony Bentley at the 2011 steeplechase awards dinner. Behind them are Mimi Voss and Laddie Merck.

DON CLIPPINGER PHOTO

The Fields also raced Approaching Squall, a favorite of Mrs. Merck who was the novice champion in 1998.

Tom Voss once described Betty Merck as the perfect owner, and in so many ways she was. As Voss noted, she wanted her horses to run when they were ready and not when she wanted them to run. She also showed up when her horses ran. She watched the 2014 Radnor races from a chair on the viewing stand and occupied a place in front of the television monitor at the Far Hills meet in October. She

also regularly attended NSA meetings.

“We all learned so much from how she lived her life,” said Guy J. Torsilieri, co-chairman of the Far Hills Racing Association and president of the National Steeplechase Association. “She lived life to the fullest and had an amazing life.”

She was preceded in death by her husband, George W. Merck, a vice president of Merck & Co. who served as the executive director of the U.S. Equestrian Team from 1965 to 1974. He died in 1984 at the age of 65.

National Steeplechase Association

400 Fair Hill Drive
Elkton, Md. 21921

Phone: (410) 392-0700
Fax: (410) 392-0706

Website: www.nationalsteeplechase.com
E-mail: info@nationalsteeplechase.com

Officers

Beverly R. Steinman, Chairman
Guy J. Torsilieri, President
P. Douglas Fout, Vice President
Patrick Butterfield, Secretary
Charles Strittmatter, Treasurer

Directors

Patrick Butterfield
R. Reynolds Cowles
M. Nixon Ellis
Alfred C. Griffin Jr.
Dwight Hall
Virginia Lazenby
George Mahoney Jr.
Neil R. Morris
Charles Noell
William L. Pape

Sharon E. Sheppard
Laura T. Shull
Beverly R. Steinman
Charles Strittmatter
Donald Yovanovich

Staff

William Gallo Jr., Director of Racing
Peter D. McGivney, General Manager
Mary T. Guessford, Racing Operations
Nancy Dougherty, Executive Secretary
Don C. Clippinger, Communications