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Author shows start of Grand Prix in Chagrin Valley

By SALI McSHERRY

MORELAND HILLS – As a kid, Betty Weibel was a groupie.

But, she wasn't trying to get backstage at a rock concert, she was waiting outside the barns at the Cleveland Metroparks Polo Field in Moreland Hills hoping to meet the great riders of the Cleveland Grand Prix horse show in the 1970s.

"They were celebrities on horseback," she said.

Mrs. Weibel has ridden horses all her life. She showed horses in the 1980s as an amateur at the show she revered, taught riding, judged contests, did commentary for ESPN and was a board member for the Chagrin Valley Professional Horseman's Associations. She also has served as publicist and co-chairwoman of the Grand Prix horse show. Early in her career, she oversaw public relations for the national American Grandprix Association, managing media and sponsor relations for the 30-event national series, as well as other top show jumping events including the World Cup.

As principal in Yopko Penhallurick, a public relations agency and a former journalist who worked for the Chagrin Valley Times, Mrs. Weibel combined her writing talent with her equestrian life and spent more than two years researching and writing "The Cleveland Grand Prix: An American Show Jumping First," published this week by the History Press. The 176-page book that features more than 65 photographs, explores how it came to be that the Chagrin Valley was the birthplace of the first horse show jumping grand prix in the Western Hemisphere, she said.

"The first Cleveland Grand Prix was innovative because it came at a time when civilian show jumpers had taken over our country's international representation following the cavalry's withdrawal after the 1948 Olympics. European outdoor courses were long and complex with a wide variety of obstacles and the major competition was known as the Grand Prix."

Laddie Andahazy, credited as one of the creators of the first grand prix show jumping course in North America, is quoted in the book: "I dreamed of having an equestrian exhibition such as what I saw in Europe."

Mrs. Weibel said, "By introducing the first European-style outdoor show jumping Grand Prix, organizers played a critical role in developing the sport of show jumping in America. That innovation sparked a future billion dollar show jumping industry with nearly 350 grand prix in the U.S. today."

Through the years there have been trials and tribulations.



Photo Courtesy of Betty Weibel

Author Betty Weibel found dusty piles of photographs and memorabilia surrounding the Cleveland Grand Prix. Sixty-five photographs made it into her book including this one of Mary Chapot who won the Cleveland Grand Prix in 1965 riding Tomboy. Her husband, Frank, won in 1971 and her daughter, Laura, won in 2001.

The show was cancelled this year due to scheduling conflicts with other equestrian events across the country and lack of sponsorship. A committee is working to attract a title sponsor and making plans for another comeback. The last time it was cancelled was in 1995.

But, next year, the show must go on. "The year 2015 marks the 50th anniversary of grand prix show jumping in America, and it all began right here in Cleveland," said show co-chairwoman Karen Schneider, a councilwoman in Gates Mills. "The Cleveland Grand Prix is a legacy that has been passed on from generation to generation of horse show lovers and people who share a deep love and passion for horses and the experiences that they bring to our lives. It is more than just a show; it reinforces Cleveland's place in the equine world and brings people together from near and far to share in a tradition. This show's survival, like all great institutions, is dependent on continued good stewardship. We hope that the equine community's current and future generations will share in our passion and efforts to keep the show thriving."

The author, who lives on a 90-acre farm that straddles Auburn and Troy, still rides. She discovered a bountiful history relating to horses and riding in Cleveland

and the Chagrin Valley. Horse shows, fox hunting, polo matches, sleigh riding and racing down Euclid Avenue in downtown Cleveland were all part of that picture.

"The Chagrin Valley Hunt Club offered a very sophisticated program of horse activities involving show horses, polo teams and riding to the hounds. At that time, virtually every club member was active in horse activities," said former Gates Mills Mayor Dan Collier in the book. "Polo teams, often made up of all one family – the Whites, Knutsens, Baldwins, Firestones – competed all over the world and won. We entertained polo teams from Mexico and South America, often army officers still wearing their guns, and, of course, this required lavish entertaining of the distinguished guests."

Mrs. Weibel also learned there was a horse racing track at the Chagrin Falls High and Middle schools and recreational center, which in the early 1920s was the site for the East Side Cuyahoga County Fairgrounds, which later moved to Berea.

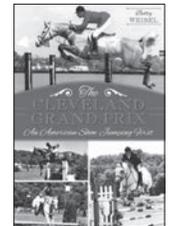
"In 1920, the Chagrin Falls Jockey Club was organized, and it hosted Thoroughbred racing at the rented fairgrounds site. Additional improvements to the track and grounds attracted top horses from Cuba, Mexico and the United States. However, racing in Chagrin Falls made

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Author Signing

"The Cleveland Grand Prix: An American Show Jumping First"

By Betty Weibel
1-3 p.m. Saturday
Fireside Book Shop
29 N. Main St. Chagrin Falls



Even the cover of author Betty Weibel's book, "The Cleveland Grand Prix: An American Show Jumping First," shows the variety offered by the Cleveland Grand Prix throughout its rich history.

Grand Prix

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headlines for the wrong reason, as gambling and track betting were illegal in Ohio. Racing was eventually halted when a 'no betting' judicial order dispatched sheriff deputies to close the track," wrote Mrs. Weibel.

According to the publisher, "Longtime fans can relive the exciting victories of some of the finest horses and riders in history, while newcomers to the sport will experience the Cleveland Grand Prix's glory years as the premier summer social tradition."

Mrs. Weibel provides an overview of horse sports in Northeast Ohio and how the Chagrin Valley grew into a world-class horse sport hub.

For more information, visit www.clevelandgrandprix.com.