

Taking an inside look at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair

By Constance Scrafield

The Royal Agricultural Winter Fair is on now, running until Sunday, November 12.

It has been a major celebration of all things and people in rural areas for over 100 years.

There is an impressive variety of equine competitions, all regarded with deep respect by horse people worldwide and the spectators who love the sport. The Royal completely fills the Enercare Centre on Princes' Blvd in Toronto's Exhibition Place. The entire building, the barn and stables, and the heritage horse palace are engulfed by all creatures great and small from the farms and estates across this and other lands.

The cups and ribbons awarded to riders and their fine and wonderful steeds at the Royal are coveted and displayed with pride in the winners' homes from many countries for international equestrian stars who come to participate in the prestigious events held here.

Not only the horses, but all the crowd of fur and feathers are put ? to a greater and lesser extent ? through their paces, including chickens, geese, and ducks.

The animal section treats folks, especially children who don't often dally with such creatures, to see birds, and in the petting area, there are goats to greet.

Some of this list of animals and others have won ribbons with little effort on their part. There is no need for them to pace or pull; no requirement for the sheep to jump structures decorated with foliage as some of the horses are required to do. The cows, however, must march and pace, haltered and led by their owners.

The cows have been strictly groomed with nearly the same intensity as the horses. Patient and resigned as cows are, they stand quietly in the ring with the others while an announcer declares their individual virtues.

The Royal is host to a large number of educators and vendors bringing a very wide range of information, interactive experiences and, of course, shopping.

Of these, among so many excellent choices, we chose two to share their stories with you.

Nicholas Mozas has brought his Dogora company to the Royal.

"Dogs have an ?ora," he said. "And we are creating clothing for dogs to have a better life. We have a line of post-surgical items to make them more comfortable. When we first began to develop our line, we based our priorities on size, shape and warmth. We wanted to find that coat. We have a [family] culture of making life better for dogs."

Their outdoor blankets are specifically designed to stop dogs from shivering as they do with other blankets.

Jason Chao's focus is art on socks. The family business goes back a couple of generations. They have designed and built very specialized knitting machines for creating interesting socks, and now that footwear comes emblazoned with amazing array of masterpieces, including the creation of Adam on the Sistine Chapel and the Mona Lisa.

Chao told us the company mainly works with museums as art is the most difficult thing to do for their industry where the pieces they want to reproduce are quite specific, and they want to do the best job possible.

The Sock Den offers a huge scope of socks, the like of which you may never have seen.

Yet, we needed to talk to a horse.

All the way around the main ring into the palace, where the stalls on the ground floor house the heavy horses, and a ramp takes one to the temporary homes of the Standardbreds and the flashy jump horses to the dancing and elegant dressage mounts.

When stopped at the stall of a kindly brown horse, a Standardbred, only restrained by a belt but who pushed his head out toward me, I took it as a gesture of welcome. We communed for a few minutes until his owner came out with a wheelbarrow of soiled straw. He took the tiny minutes I wanted to talk about himself and this pleasantly mannered horse.

?He's Robin U Blind,? Dale Salisbury told us. ?He's won several ribbons and he's eight years old. We never know how long a horse will run and he'll let us know when he's done. But we'll keep [him] with us.?