

ERIK OLSEN / SPECIAL TO THE ASHEVILLE CITIZEN-TIMES

A rider competes in the Grand Prix during the fall 2014 series at Tryon International Equestrian Center.

Equestrian center already riding high

The horse complex could draw 90,000 visitors April to October

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MILL SPRING, North Carolina — Triple Crown season is upon us, and some experts say American Pharoah could finally be the one to end the 37-year-old trifecta drought.

Don't know what any of that means?

What Mark Bellissimo, 53, is doing less than an hour southeast of Asheville, North Carolina, and about 40 minutes north of Spartanburg could change that.

The former software company entrepreneur bought a struggling Florida horse showgrounds property in 2006 and during the next few years became a globally known equestrian-industry mogul. He's been on a mission to de-elitify the exclusive world of equine sports ever since.

"I want this place to be a private, commercial enterprise centered around the love of horses," said Bellissimo, atop a dirt ridge overlooking roughly 1,400 acres that comprise the Tryon International Equestrian Center.

Make no mistake. The complex plays to the plush crowd. Multi-bedroom rental houses already dot the property. Upscale hotels are in the works. A future sports complex will include a pool, tennis courts and a deluxe workout facility.

The center, which held its first event last year, will have 500 permanent stables, a 6,000- to 7,000-seat outdoor stadium, a jumbotron, a concert stage, a 100,000 square-foot covered arena "with the most footing of any arena in the world," Bellissimo said, and an additional 500 stables.

People will be able to watch movies on the jumbotron in golf carts like at a drive-in, Bellissimo said.

The hotel properties will be operated by Virginia-based Salamander Hotels & Resorts.

Future development will include retail space and a second luxury hotel and spa near the Arnold Palmer-designed golf course. Everything could be done by 2017.

State-of-the-art competitive facilities will draw Olympian equestrian athletes to compete in events such as the Rolex Grand Prix on June 6, which NBC Sports will broadcast the next day.

A Grand Prix equestrian competition is comparable to a NASCAR Sprint Cup race.

Despite the glitz and glam, Bellissimo, a co-founder of Tryon Equestrian Partners and one of a half-dozen primary investors who have spent about $100 million developing the complex, is all about opening up doors, not shutting gates.

He plans to do what he did near Palm Beach, Florida — one of the most gilt-edged communities in America: flood the fields with commoners.

Against the will of much of the established equestrian community surrounding Wellington village, a hamlet within Palm Beach, Bellissimo said he eliminated admission fees and created an event called Saturday Night Lights.

The family-friendly affair featured horse-jumping shows and allowed people to walk the Wellington showgrounds within the Palm Beach International Equestrian Center.

Public support and awareness skyrocketed, helping the $250 million purchase of the showgrounds transform from a risky Great Recession proposition into a worldwide success. About 300,000 visitors swamp the center each year.

Spartanburg County officials are working with Tryon equestrian officials to cross-promote their destinations in anticipation of a tourist influx, said Chris Jennings, executive director of Spartanburg's Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"We see this as a great opportunity for those folks to do something in the Upstate and Carolina foothills region," Jennings said. "We're one of the closer destinations. And I hope that many of our population of 250,000 say, 'I will go up and enjoy the equestrian center.' "

That's likely for anybody within driving distance, considering admission and parking at the Tryon center are free. Many Saturday Night Lights activities also have no charge. Those include face painting, street performers and rides on a hand-painted wooden carousel made in Italy.

The fun begins at 5 p.m., and the equestrian competition begins at 6:30 p.m.

And, who knows, perhaps by the end of the summer a lot more people will know American Pharoah as the horse that became the first Triple Crown Winner since Affirmed.