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Essex Horse Trails returns to Far Hills this weekend

FAR HILLS - They're putting the "family" in the Essex Horse Trials and Family Country Weekend.

The fabled trials, a premier equestrian competition, will take place this weekend at Moorland Farm following its successful return last year after a 19-year absence.

The Rowsells of Long Valley may just be the June 23-24 event's first family.

Morgan Rowsell is the event's co-chair and course designer. He helped Ralph Jones and others bring back what was one of the leading events on the equestrian calendar for three decades. His wife, Virginia, now a trainer and instructor, was a champion rider who won Essex in 1994. Next up in the saddle is their 8-year-old daughter, Leeci.

"She's pretty much been in a barn every weekend of her life," said Morgan Rowsell, one of a handful of equestrian course designers in the United States. "She's been taking lessons with her mom for years, which has been a great bonding experience and fun to watch."

Leeci started competing during the past two summers at starter horse trials and grass roots events, which her dad says are a good way to get into the sport.

"We just want her to have fun and enjoy herself and have a positive experience," he added. Over the Memorial Day weekend, Leeci completed her very first U.S. Eventing Association (USEA) recognized event, finishing in third place at the Flora Lee Spring Horse Trials in Medford.

"She was pretty poised for an eight year old. Virginia was more nervous than Leeci," Morgan Rowsell said. "We want her to ride well and have the pony do well, but the most important thing for us is just to see her come off the course with a smile on her face."

At the Essex Horse Trials, Leeci will be competing as a Beginner Novice in which riders traverse a course with fewer obstacles on a shorter course and gallop at a slower pace than the more experienced riders will do during their competitions over the weekend.

Adding to the prestige of competing in front of large crowds on the historic 230-acre property is her opportunity to ride on one of her father's beautifully-designed courses, which is set to challenge more than 200 competitors this year.

"We've been having a good time busting each other about it," laughed Morgan, who admits it will be a special experience for him as well.

Family Activities

The Mars Essex Horse Trials & Family Country Weekend features two days of premier equestrian competition and outdoor family-oriented events.

For the competitive horseperson, Essex features Eventing, essentially an equestrian triathlon combining the elegance of Dressage, the thrill of Cross-Country and the precision of Show Jumping.

Family activities include a classic car show with more than 200 entries on Saturday; a food court offering fresh food from local markets; The Essex Market, offering a wide range of shopping from saddles and riding gear to jewelry and artwork; and the Willow School children's activity center.

Title sponsor, Mars, is also hosting a candy hunt for children at 3 p.m. on Saturday.

General admission is \$15 in advance and \$20 at the gate. Parking is free.

VIP options include Waterside Tailgating, which offers prime, up-close viewing around the event's signature cross-country water complex. Also, Hilltop Tailgating overlooks most of the cross-country course and provides panoramic views of the entire event.

Proceeds will benefit 300 children from the Greater Newark LifeCamp.