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Dr. Timothy Gardner, vice president of the Fair Hill Foundation, was a key player in bringing the 5 Star to Cecil County, Md.

UP TO THE CHALLENGE

Fair Hill takes center stage as it hosts the second 5 Star event in United States.

BY MICHAEL BRADLEY
PHOTOS BY JIM GRAHAM

Boyd Martin at Fair Hill International.

There are six other 5 Star eventing competitions around the world, and the Fair Hill meeting will be the seventh.

When Lillian Heard was growing up on a small horse farm in Maryland, the idea that one of the world's premier eventing competitions would take place near her home wasn't even a consideration. Now, she'll be riding in the first-ever Fair Hill 5 Star competition this October at the Cecil County property's venerable grounds.

It's a remarkable opportunity for the local standout, who's participated in other 5 Star events in Kentucky and Europe. "There aren't many 5 Stars in the world, so it's a huge deal to have another one on this continent—not to mention in my backyard," says Heard says. "During my career, if you wanted to do a 5 Star in a month other than April (when the Kentucky competition takes place), you had to raise $30,000 to travel abroad. That's tough on the horse. You show up in Europe with a little less of a horse."

There are six other 5 Star eventing competitions around the world. The Fair Hill meeting will be the seventh. Eventing's three-discipline contest requires riders to excel in dressage, cross country and show jumping. The 5 star level is the top of the sport. "It attracts the best horses and best riders from around the world," says Boyd Martin, a highly decorated eventer who competed in the Tokyo Olympics. "There are just a few events at this level in the world. The prize money and the difficulty of the course attract the A-listers."

Fair Hill regular Caitlin Silliman.

Boyd Martin says the 5 Star will be a tougher challenge than the Olympics, thanks to a longer cross-country course and higher jumps. "Only a small group of horses and riders can actually compete at this level," he says.

With its rich tradition in the equestrian community, Fair Hill is an appropriate choice for the second 5 Star in the United States. The site's history dates to 1925, when William du Pont Jr. began to amass property along the Maryland-Pennsylvania border as a nature preserve to be used for foxhunting and horse racing. "He built Fair Hill to look like Aintree in England," says Dr. Timothy Gardner, vice president of the Fair Hill Foundation.

In 1974, nine years after du Pont's death, the state of Maryland purchased more than 5,000 acres of the property within its borders. In 1989, the first competition was held—a cross-country event on a course created by noted English designer Michael Tucker. Since then, Fair Hill has been the site of many other contests, on its way to becoming a Mid-Atlantic equestrian mecca. In 2017, the Sport & Entertainment Corporation of Maryland bid to host the 5 Star, and Fair Hill was chosen from among a group that included potential sites in Florida, North Carolina and Virginia. The competition was originally scheduled for 2020, but COVID restrictions pushed it back a year.

Thanks to a public-private partnership that features a $10 million grant from the state, Fair Hill will present a refurbished course designed by former U.K. Olympian Ian Stark. Gardner expects between 30,000 and 40,000 people to attend the three-day event and projects that "at least a dozen" international riders will compete for a purse that could exceed $300,000. "This will put Cecil County, Md., on the map," Gardner says. "There will be plenty of fans and competitors here from around the world."

Caitlin Silliman believes that Ally KGO will soon be a 5 Star-caliber ride. For now, though, the filly isn't quite ready. That means Silliman, who divides her time between Cochranville and Aiken, S.C., will be witnessing the first-ever Fair Hill 5 Star at a site she's extremely familiar with. "It's going to be hard to watch, because I'll wish I was out there," she says. "But it's also such a massive competition that it will be fun."

Born in Malvern, Silliman began her equestrian career with riding lessons for her sixth birthday. She's since blossomed into a 5 Star talent who's competed in the Kentucky event three times on Catch A Star, a horse now retired. Earlier this year, she had the opportunity to ride on the new cross-country course and see the new arena. "It's incredible," she says.

Several parts of the Fair Hill grounds have undergone renovations and improvements in advance of the 5 Star competition. Gardner reports that the cross-country course was improved considerably to make it tough enough to challenge the world's best riders. There's also a new grandstand,

(Here and right) Lillian Heard will be riding in the first-ever Fair Hill 5 Star.

temporary stands have been added, and the jumping course has been upgraded.

Fair Hill provided considerable funding, but a sizeable grant from the state of Maryland also helped. So did the Sport & Entertainment Corporation of Maryland, charged with luring significant events to the state. The nonprofit organization helped assemble the bid, as it did with the Maryland Cycling Classic. It's also heading the effort to bring 2026 World Cup soccer games to Baltimore. Co-chaired by Mike Hankin and Mike Gill and led by president and CEO Jeff Newman, the Fair Hill Organizing Committee will stage the event, solicit sponsors and ensure a top-flight fan experience. "[The corporation's] help was crucial to the bid," says Gardner.

Although Gardner's attendance estimate falls well short of the 120,000 that show up in England, it is the 5 Star's first year in Maryland. The number could double in the future. The prize money is certainly worthy of notice, and that should attract top riders from across the globe—and that's what it's about.

Martin says the 5 Star will be a tougher challenge than the Olympics, thanks to a longer cross-country course and higher jumps. "Only a small group of horses and riders can actually compete at this level," he says. "It takes years to qualify a rider and a horse. You need thousands of hours of training and fitness—and a little bit of luck."

Even the European riders—who tend to be a little particular when it comes to courses—will be impressed. "They'll think it's tough," says Heard. "The course designer has designed courses overseas, and he's tough."

Heard is definitely energized by the opportunity. So are Martin and other top riders, including 2021 Olympian Phillip Dutton, who's been an enthusiastic supporter of the 5 Star. "To have a 5 Star here in Maryland is unbelievable for the sport of eventing," Martin says. "An event of this caliber puts Fair Hill at the ultimate level of the equestrian world."

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