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Virginia Gold Cup Fans Salute Six-Time Champion

12-Year-Old Thoroughbred's Retirement Lap Highlights Horse Country Steeplechase Event

By *Liz Seymour*Washington Post Staff Writer
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He is the Michael Jordan of his field, a 1,250-pound thoroughbred so quick and so perfect in his jumps that he won the Virginia Gold Cup an astonishing six times in a row.

But the aging athlete has slowed down a bit these last few months, and now 12-year-old Saluter is in retirement. So when he returned yesterday to the northern Fauquier County site of his many victories, it was not to race but to gallop one last time around the course.

His fans, there to witness his 10-minute retirement ride, were gushing with memories of his winning years.

"Saluter is a hero, and today is his day," said Nini Ferguson of the District, a Gold Cup regular who wore a navy straw hat with an enormous brim covered in tulle. "I have goose bumps talking about Saluter."

Pam Palmer, of Ashburn, said, "When you see a horse like that, it's really such an inspiration."

Saluter's retirement gallop was the highlight of yesterday's 76th Virginia Gold Cup steeplechase in The Plains. The biggest event in horse country is not just for sports enthusiasts. For many of the record 53,000 in attendance, it was really a giant street festival with horses, and a chance to be part of one of the region's biggest social events.

Men were decked out in striped ties and a rainbow of blazers in kelly green, salmon or yellow. Women donned straw hats, pearls, sundresses and sandals. Many of them beat the heat with clear plastic fans as they strolled the rolling green grounds of the 300-acre Great Meadows hours before the first race.

"We've heard that this is the best tailgate party ever," said Marylou Van Hintum, a first-timer. She joined the early crowds so her dog, Ben, could participate in the day's first event: a Jack Russell terrier race. Ben finished last, but Van Hintum, 24, of Nokesville, vowed to return next year and see Ben a winner.

Northern Virginia's new economy was nowhere to be found a year after dot-com company representatives dominated the white tents -- with rented tables, chairs and even picket fences -- atop the tony Member's Hill.

Their absence may have been a symbol of the sluggish economy, but last week's summerlike weather drove up advance ticket sales, organizers of the \$1 million event said.

The Gold Cup remains a magnet for the region's rich and famous, and, indeed, members of the crowd spotted Virginia Democratic gubernatorial candidate Mark

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R. Warner in their midst. But yesterday was clearly Saluter's day.

People abandoned their picnics and conversations and descended the hill to get a glimpse of his goodbye gallop. A list of his achievements was read over the loudspeaker, and then, with music playing, he took to the track. When he jumped, people cheered. William Allison, the president of the Gold Cup's board of directors, presented him with a basket of carrots and apples.



"The crowd here just erupts for him," said Jack Fisher, the horse's trainer and jockey.

Before the gallop, Saluter paced in his 10-by-10 stall in the barn, and Fisher joked that the horse feared he was going to have to race.

"He's restless," Fisher said. "He's saying, 'You told me we weren't going to do this anymore. You know I'm not fit to race.' "

Fisher said he's not upset that Saluter won't race again. The horse is now training for fox hunting.

"It would be like if Michael Jordan comes back and plays," Fisher said. "He's lost some of it and wouldn't do as well now. [Saluter's] a superstar. I don't like him to be beat.

"He's done everything we could ask him to do the last couple of years of the Gold Cup. People would ask if there's a lot of pressure to do it again, and I'd say 'No, he's already done it.' "

Staff writer Maria Glod contributed to this report.

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