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## South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

### Stadium Jumping making \$1 million in improvements to arena

#### Stadium Jumping invests \$1 million to upgrade facility

By Matt Presser

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Few people likely would use the word exciting to describe the process of watching grass grow.

But that's exactly how officials at Stadium Jumping Inc., the producer of Wellington's annual National Horse Show and Winter Equestrian Festival, are describing what's happening at the Internationale Arena at the Palm Beach Polo Equestrian Club.

After planting a new type of Bermuda grass called Celebration there a few weeks ago, it has started sprouting up. The grass is one element of the nearly \$1 million in renovations going into the club's facilities, despite plans for Stadium Jumping to move to new showgrounds after its lease expires at the end of next year.

The renovations include more than \$250,000 to improve the main arena's foundation, known as footing, which became an issue at last year's events, said Eugene R. Mische, Stadium Jumping's chairman of the board.

"A lot of horses were slipping, and we couldn't really get the performances we wanted," Mische said. "We couldn't really fix it overnight, so we did what we could."

Patchwork was used on the field last year, but they didn't want to take any chances this year, Stadium Jumping spokesman Kenneth Kraus said. So, they took out "every bit of top soil and started again" with

the new grass, Kraus said.

Victoria McCullough, an amateur rider and a member of Wellington's equestrian committee, said the footing was so slippery last season that her trainer advised her and other equestrians not to put their horses in the Internationale Arena.

"It was as bad as you could possibly get," she said. "It was historical in its demise for footing."

Footing is the "most critical element" for riders, and several horses slipped and sustained injuries last year, she said.

McCullough said she is grateful for the renovations, but that she and the other riders will examine the surface before they decide whether to show their horses this season, which begins with the National Horse Show in December and includes the Winter Equestrian Festival, which runs from January to April.

Stadium Jumping understands riders' concerns and expects the improvements will be well received, Mische said.

"You can't really have the best horse show in the world and not have good footing here," he said.

The Winter Equestrian Festival, known as the world's largest and longest-running equestrian competition, and the National Horse Show bring more than \$66.5 million to the village each year, according to a report released in August by a Florida Atlantic University professor.

The improvements, which are expected to be completed by the end of September, include renovating the club's seven other arenas, repairing and painting miles of fencing, and resurfacing stable areas.

The 82-acre facility was built on Pierson Road in 1990 for about 1,000 horses, Mische said. More than 3,000 horses compete there each week during the winter.

"The sport is growing, and we have to grow along with it," he said.

Stadium Jumping announced plans in May to move to a 179-acre property in Wellington Preserve in the southeast part of the village. The Village Council will meet at 5 p.m. Tuesday at the Wellington Community Center, 12165 W. Forest Hill Blvd., to vote on whether to approve the move.

Developer Mark Bellissimo announced last month that he had purchased Palm Beach Polo Equestrian Club and plans to continue hosting shows there after Stadium Jumping leaves.

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