

▼ Erin and John Fann with their daughter Berkeley



ERIN HALL FANN & JOHN FANN

Outside the Ring

They're Bringing 'Fun' Back

By Betts Coup

We spend a lot of time reminiscing in the horse show world. We talk about the horses of the past, always looking back to the greatest rivalries in our history, like CH Sky Watch and CH Imperator. Everyone remembers the Equitation stars from past decades and even the times when pleasure horses were a little different from how they are now. But our love of the past goes outside of the ring, too, to the glamorous horse show parties of yesteryear, nights when everyone puts competition aside to enjoy a night of entertainment, dancing and top-notch food and drink. We may not be able to bring back the horses of the good old days (though we've got some pretty amazing horses out there right now), but Erin Hall Fann and her husband, John, are bringing back those parties. At shows like the Blue Ridge Classic and J.D. Massey, they've put together parties with Moulin Rouge dancers, astronauts and island themes, to name a few.

"It's nothing new that we're doing," says John. "We're just bringing parties back to what they used to be and keeping a high standard." Their company, EventMix Promotions, does much more than just plan the parties, though. They offer multiple other services, including photography, videography and marketing for horse shows and serve the "outside world,"

meaning non-horse related events, including weddings, corporate events and even street fairs. However, for Erin Hall Fann, the daughter of longtime horse show photographer Sandra Hall, the fact that they can bring something new to the table at horse shows, in the world where she grew up and where she can still meet up with her family and friends, has been an incredible and exciting opportunity. She and John simply hope more shows start making use of their services and that shows continue to develop an interest in the social aspects of their communities.

Erin grew up in Chesterfield, South Carolina, as the daughter of Sandra and Keith Hall. Sandra and Keith had actually met while working at Saddlebred stables, and Sandra had gone on to begin a career as one of the best horse show photographers in the country. Erin and her younger brother, Wes, both started riding on horses their parents had at home and then started taking lessons with Harrison and Beverly Shiflet. As a young girl, the horse shows were something at which Erin only competed during the summers, with interest in other sports during the school year. However, after she stepped out of Academy into the Equitation division, she started to take it more seriously, and by the end of her junior exhibitor days, she



▲ John racing motocross

had racked up some very serious successes in the Southeastern circuit, and was top three in her age group at Louisville.

While attending those shows, Erin was already developing her skills as a businesswoman and photographer. She started out working at her mom's sales table at the shows, taking orders and working with the customers. Erin's career as a photographer began on one random day when Sandra had been asked to do a stable shoot at Blythewood Farm. Erin accompanied her, and when they arrived, Sandra handed her a second camera and told her to just take some photos from different angles. "They liked one of mine the best," says Erin. "She'd just put a camera in my hand and encourage me to go for it!"

Erin gave up riding to attend college at High Point University in North Carolina, where she studied business and met her future husband and business partner, John Fann. John had absolutely no background with horses; he had grown up racing motocross very seriously, even traveling to compete in many of the very same arenas where Erin had shown horses. However, until he met Erin, he had no interest in horses. "I always say Erin is horses, and I'm horsepower," John explains, laughing. John studied graphic design at that time, having always had a creative side. As a kid growing up in Yadkinville, North Carolina, he competed in art contests and always daydreamed of new and crazy ideas. "I always had the idea that I wanted to work for myself. I knew I wanted to be an entrepreneur," says John. While still in school, he and Erin first started dabbling in event planning, putting John's creative sensibilities and Erin's business acumen to work organizing motocross events in the area. "I raced motocross on the professional level. That's where my passion was, so we put on arenacross and motocross events."

They then moved to Clemson, South Carolina, so that Erin could complete her Master's degree in Applied Economics and Statistics at Clemson University. John went back to school at Clemson, too, adding a sports management major and business minor to his education roster. While at Clemson, they started expanding their event planning to include equestrian-related parties. It wasn't a difficult decision. "We were just sitting here talking one night, and I asked if Erin thought we could move into equestrian things and expand into something she loved. That way, we could make it fun for both of us," John says. It didn't take long for business to pick up. "We did some events on a volunteer basis while in school, some things for horse shows. We just sort of tested the waters to see if it was something we enjoyed. And then when John graduated, we just decided to make the jump and go for it!" Erin explains.

In 2009, when they were both done with school, they agreed it was time to step up a couple of different levels, beyond just the business. They also decided to get married. Having been together since 2002, they knew it was time, and their wedding was actually the first event of that kind that they ever planned. They knew their priorities, though; they wanted it to be a really great party. "We hired the band first," John says. They were married at Clemson, with their reception at the Conference Center on campus. "We have weddings where the grooms play golf all day. I took care of my wedding—I was hanging bunting. But it was what I wanted to do," says John. Plenty of members of their horse show family were present, and Doug Shiflet acted as their photographer.

That same year, they pushed EventMix Promotions into Phase II, turning it into a full-time job for John, with a focus on equestrian events. "I had a gut feeling," says John, "and I always try to trust those. But it took a lot of thinking out, and Erin was scared to death about the risks involved." Erin and John had each been working full-time jobs that offered them skills necessary for the new phase for EventMix, but losing regular paychecks was still intimidating for the always-pragmatic Erin. John had



John photographing a bridal session ▲

worked in sales for Gallo wines, and that really helped him develop his ability to present products and services, work closely with people and handle any problems that might arise. Erin, on the other hand, was working for the city of Anderson, South Carolina, where they have been based since graduation. She was assisting with business development and economic development via small business. That gave her experience with gathering and presenting facts, writing up reports and handling all kinds of minute financial details. Although Erin has retained this job while assisting John with EventMix, she hopes to join the company full-time in the near future. Even as they first started EventMix as a full-time commitment, the division of labor was clear-cut, not just from their experience, but also from their very opposite but complementary ways of thinking. As Erin explains, "John is the visionary and takes care of the creative side. He does the design work, laying out everything and figuring out the logistics. I'm the numbers person. I handle the budget and deal with all the bidding and vendors." John also tours all potential venues and personally arranges the catering and rentals, and lines up the entertainment.

"She keeps me grounded and organized," John says. "I don't know what I would do with out her." They both recognize what each other brings to the table and know that each element is incredibly key to the success of their innovative business.

Erin adds, "I'm not creative. He's constantly saying, 'This would be awesome!' And I have to ask him to draw me something so I can picture it. We both have our strong points."

In the end, they phased out most of the motocross events because of a decline in the interest shortly after new age regulations were passed. Motocross will always be a personal love of John's, but his interest in the success of the new business outweighed his passion for the sport. Adding the other elements of their business was a natural progression. Over the years, both Erin and John had become skilled photographers, having worked with both Sandra at shows and helping Doug Shiflet at Louisville. Erin had been of great assistance to her mom during the transition from film to digital photography back in 2005 and 2006, right after she'd graduated from Clemson. She helped switch the whole business over to strictly digital photography, working in partnership with several other horse show photographers at the time. Erin also started taking the now iconic photos from new angles outside of the ring, and soon enough, John was behind the lens, too. "Once Mom knew John would be in the family, she just handed him a camera and said, you try it, too," Erin grins. That particular element of EventMix has been the longest running, beyond just the event planning. They now offer photography at all the parties, and also do farm shoots, wedding and engagement photo sessions and pretty much any other type of photography that anyone might ask for.

EventMix also offers promotion services, working with the horse industry and local businesses. They've done a lot of marketing for the nearby speedway and designed flyers for events and services at horse shows. "I think (marketing is) something we really do mostly for our events," Erin says. "It's an asset but not the majority avenue of our business. Nonetheless, it's pretty unique." In 2012, they decided to give up their studio space in downtown Anderson, South Carolina, in order to invest in the field of videography. This year, they've been able to be the official videographers at the same horse shows where they're throwing parties, with Erin overseeing the videographers and managing customer orders and John in charge of the last-minute party planning. They can also do livestreaming, something that is becoming more and more popular at larger horse shows. John and Erin have also shot promotional videos for a couple of farms and for the American Morgan Horse Association. To the Fanns, expanding into a new service, one that could be added to those



A wedding reception planned by EventMix ▲



A wedding ceremony planned by EventMix ▲

they already offered, seemed like a better idea than keeping the studio. They are still determined to grow their local client base, but, at the same time, they believe that adding videography brought EventMix into its next phase. Working from home has also made it easier for both of the Fanns, as they had a baby just last November, a girl named Berkeley, and they are able to spend more time with her.

The fact that Erin and John can plan a party from scratch, advertise it and commemorate it via photography and videography is pretty incredible. That's what makes EventMix so special and so groundbreaking. It's also what makes EventMix occasionally difficult for people to understand, as they don't realize just how many different services go under the umbrella of their business. "We're one of the first in the equestrian world who are doing this," Erin says.

Both John and Erin are incredibly grateful to Liz Holmes, the show manager at the Blue Ridge Classic, who gave them their first real opportunity to show what they could do. They've been taking care of all the hospitality at that show for the last four years, and this year also acted as the official videographers.

"She's the one who gave us the opportunity and believed in what we could do," John says. "We put together a nice proposal and met with her, and she decided to let us try. It just took off from there. We owe her a lot—she has made our company, as far as the equestrian events go." Each year, the Fanns meet with Liz a few times before the show, but once it gets rolling, they take care of hospitality, from breakfasts each morning to parties every night. They prep the announcements for center ring and



▲ One Love Party flyer



▲ Glow Party flyer



▲ Flyer for JD Massey 2012



▲ Flyer for '80s Flashback party



▲ Flyer for the Outer Space Voyage party

put out all the flyers to spread the word about the parties. For the last two years, the Blue Ridge Classic has been the top USEF Best of Breed Show, and the Fanns couldn't be more proud of how they've added to it. "It allowed us to establish ourselves and approach other horse shows," John says. "We now have farms and barns that approach us." They've done Christmas parties for High Caliber Stables for the last two years and have planned Matt Shiflet's Friday night exhibitors' party at Raleigh for the last three years. They've handled the last couple exhibitors' party at J.D. Massey and became their official videographers this year. EventMix also works with Morgan shows. The board of the Southern States Morgan Horse Show wanted to kick it up a notch for their fortieth anniversary, so they hired EventMix to handle their parties. "We already have some shows that have approached us about possibilities for next year," Erin says. "Even if it doesn't end up being next year, if we can start the conversation, that's good."

Planning parties and handling every element is quite a process, but it's one that Erin and John have mastered. For horse shows, the first step is to approach the show management, just by sending out flyers or brochures explaining what EventMix could do for the show, with images from past parties and hospitality suites. They offer to have a conversation about what they could do, and if the potential client is interested, they sit down and meet with them. This initial meeting is where Erin and John just try to gain an understanding of what it is the client wants by looking at what the show has done in the past, asking a lot of questions and suggesting what the Fanns could improve. They discuss the budget and goals, and then they go back home and let John's imagination run wild. "I like to ride in my car and just get ideas," John says "Erin told me to start a notebook, and I have. I don't know how many of those ideas will ever come to life, but I have a really big book!" Erin and John work out every last detail and write up a

proposal. At the second meeting, they present that proposal, complete with a party flyer, a mapped layout of how the party will look, photos of décor options from the EventMix warehouse, the budget, possible menus and entertainment options. "John goes through the logistics and the design, and I do the budget. We don't just say the whole thing will be this much money; we have an itemized budget, and we answer all the questions they might have," explains Erin.

Very often, the Fanns have to present that information in front of horse show boards, and it can be a complicated, drawn-out process. But once they've established the kind of parties they're going to throw and what other elements will be their responsibility, the Fanns get to serious work. They pride themselves in having a high standard for any event, and they make sure that each part of the party, from the band to the food, is always up to par. Sometimes that means doing tastings from many caterers or working with a variety of vendors to come up with just the right options.

"There have been times we've gone to five different craft stores just to find ribbon to match a certain fabric. It makes just that difference, and somebody is going to notice," says Erin. Their food selections change depending on the party. "It's not all Southern food," John explains. "We keep it fresh. Sometimes we do vegetarian and healthy things, sometimes we work with themes. But no matter what, we put a lot into it." They have a few other things that they always insist upon, including an open bar. "We want people to just come in and relax and not have to give, give, give," says John. It's something they've learned from going to all different kinds of events, from Erin's graduate school parties to conferences. "It sets the tone for the evening, and we want people to just be able to relax, to take a moment away from the horse show."

The parties that the Fanns throw aren't just your typical party, either. A couple of years ago at the Blue Ridge Classic, John designed

a Moulin Rouge party that remains one of his all-time favorites. "It was a full production," he says. "I got to do everything from dance routines to costumes to building a forty-foot Eiffel Tower. It was a mind-blowing experience." They had chorus girls walk up and down the concourse during the show, passing out flyers and developing the "buzz." Once the party started, it was as if everyone had been transported to a different time and place.

"The coolest thing about it was when a lady came up and asked me if we got the whole thing in some kind of package deal, and I could tell her we designed it all ourselves," John says. For one J.D. Massey party, they had a man dressed up as an astronaut and built a rocket ship set up on a lift, so it could actually take off. They set up a photo booth with him, and it was an incredible success. "There were people who I never thought I'd see in a photo booth there," says Erin. "It's awesome, and we feel successful. When the party starts, we take a step back. Everything and everybody's there. And it's really cool to take photos and see everybody's reactions."

The Fanns like to give back, too, and always try to do something special for their clients. "We feel really strongly that, if we are given the opportunity to work with them, we try to do something in return. It's important to us," Erin explains. For instance, before their involvement at Blue Ridge, Wednesday night of the show had no event; now the Fanns throw a party that they cover themselves, just to show their appreciation. They also sponsor unanimous blue ribbons, so if a horse and rider receive the support of all three judges for the win, they are given an additional blue ribbon. "There must be three or more horses in the class, so when you make a victory pass with both ribbons, it makes quite a statement!" Erin says. At J.D. Massey, they held a One Love Island Night with a steel drum band, food and drinks. No matter what the event is, the Fanns always add one surprise element for the clients, something to add to the fun and make the clients feel like they've been treated especially well. At Matt Shiflet's party at Raleigh, John hired a guy to dress up like one of the members of Blue Man Group and surprised him during a speech. "The guy was like two feet taller than Matt, and everybody was laughing, and he had no idea," says John.

The humor that John and Erin have for their work is absolutely necessary because a remarkable amount of time, effort and organization goes into making each event happen. It's more than just finding the right elements to create a party atmosphere—they also have to have fully trained, highly capable staff members handle all legal requirements, get all permits and make sure everything follows code. They have eight to ten part-time employees they use regularly. "We put a lot of value in consistency," says John. Even though their services might cost a tad more than having volunteers working, the quality is important. Even their videographers are trained before stepping behind a camera, and anyone who is hired for an event is required to come see one prior to working, just to understand what is expected and what the experience will be like. The Fanns expect completely professional attitudes from their employees. Beyond that, they take care of all the other backstage issues. "Safety is a huge issue," John says. "We have to abide by a lot of laws and make sure our permits are in place. You don't just throw up a stage and get to serve alcohol." Erin chimes in, "Every venue is different, and all the states are different."

But Erin is a wiz with organization and makes sure everything is in place. "There's a lot of behind the scenes work," she says, "a lot of phone calls, and emails and setting up a schedule so you make sure things are all set." That doesn't make things completely easy. All sorts of things can throw off a schedule, especially at a horse show. From vendors making deliveries at the wrong place, to double-booked DJs, to the horse show schedule changing at the last minute, Erin makes sure that no problem



Moulin Rouge dancers ▲



Astronaut ready to launch the rocket at the Outer Space Voyage party ▲



'70s party at the Southern States Regional Morgan Horse Show ▲



▲ New York City-themed exhibitors party



High Caliber Stables Christmas party ▲

ever gets in the way. She also has the advantage of understanding how horse shows flow, so she knows what kind of delays to expect and is ready to handle any sudden speed-ups in the timeline. Plus, something always gets added in at the last minute. "There's always that barn that suddenly wants you to do their part of the Progressive Party the day before, with barn colors coordinated and everything. But we always put it together," says John, laughing a little. "That's what keeps the job going—every day is different." Erin adds, "It's never monotonous!"

For the Fanns, the horse show parties are often the easiest, simply because Erin does have that understanding of how they work and the potential for schedule changes. With weddings, their stress is much higher. "It's a one-shot deal," she says. "The horse show gets over ten minutes early, it's fine. We just start serving. If the wedding is ten minutes late, that's a whole different factor. The stress factor goes up a little bit." However, one

of the Fanns' favorite times is when a party has gotten started, and they can step back and just watch everyone enjoy it. That goes for every party they throw, from baby showers and Christmas parties, to exhibitors' parties and weddings. "It gives us such a sense of accomplishment," Erin says.

The Fanns' work often speaks for itself, as they are always the photographers at their events and use those photographs to promote EventMix. "It's one thing to have a great party; it's another to have great photos to remember it by," says John. They have a strong social media presence, with a busy Facebook page and a well designed website that lays out each service that they offer. "A lot of people have surprised us by understanding what we do and why it's worth it, some that I never would have expected," says John. Though they know that their high standards might reduce some people's interest in hiring EventMix, John and Erin truly want to work with any show and any farm.

ON THE SPOT WITH *John Fann*

Your idea of perfection?

For me, it's sitting on the West Coast, watching the sun go down. I've got a West Coast mentality. We try to go out to California when we can, once a year. All my racing buddies are out there.

What talent do you wish you had?

I want to be able to play an instrument other than the air guitar.

What is your greatest fear?

Power outages at an event.

If you could be anyone for a day, who would you be?

I'd have to go back to my motocross for this one. I would like to be my hero from when I was growing up, David Bailey. He was paralyzed when I was younger, but he lives a pretty normal life.

What is your most treasured possession?

Berkeley, and Chappy, too. He has cool markings, and he was our kid before Berkeley came along.

Who do you most admire?

I have a lot of people I admire, especially in the horse business. I see how hard the trainers work. I've gotten the opportunity to follow a few trainers for a weekend. It's not my background, but I've done everything, and no joke, it's hard work. Probably horse trainers and their help—some of the guys are like NASCAR pitcrews. They're out there all hours, working horses. It's crazy to me.

If you had one extra hour in your day, what would you do with it?

I'd spend it with Erin and Berkeley and Chap, probably someplace secluded so we could concentrate on each other.

If you had to pick a theme song for your life, what would it be?

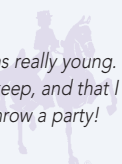
Right now, I'm really into Jason Aldean's "Fly Over States."

If not your current occupation, what would you be?

I'd still be tied in with the motocross industry. I have a bucket list to go over to Europe and maybe get back into the racing or get in the industry. I'd like to do something around motorcycles.

How would you like to be remembered?

Maybe hard-working. A hard work ethic has been instilled in me since I was really young. And I'd like people to remember that I never made a promise I wouldn't keep, and that I always treated people the way I wanted to be treated. That, and I could throw a party!



ON THE SPOT WITH *Erin Hall Fann*

Your idea of perfection?

Probably Berkeley. (John comments, "She's total perfection.") And definitely watching a good horse go down the rail.

What talent do you wish you had?

Mine would be the talent of being more artistic and creative. (John: "She's learning from the best, though!")

What is your greatest fear?

Probably storms. I hate to be outside during storms.

If you could be anyone for a day, who would you be?

Katy Perry

What is your most treasured possession?

Berkeley and Chappy (our 8-year-old Jack Russell) and our family. I'm lucky, I still have two grandmas and one grandfather still alive. It's cool when Berkeley gets to hang out with them.

Who do you most admire?

I'd probably say my parents.

If you had one extra hour in your day, what would you do with it?

Probably the same thing. Or I'd work out! That gets put on the background. But really, I'd spend it with Berkeley and have family time.

If you had to pick a theme song for your life, what would it be?

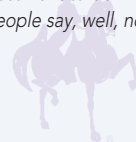
Darryl Worley, "Awful Beautiful Life"

If not your current occupation, what would you be?

I could see myself doing logistics and stuff for huge events, like the Superbowl, or I'd like to be someone's personal assistant! I think that'd be an awesome job.

How would you like to be remembered?

We've always talked about being as you are. That we want to always be ourselves, no matter who we're around, and not change for who people are. We just want to be ourselves. I think that would be an awesome legacy to leave, to have people say, well, no matter who they were around, they were themselves.



For the Fanns, it's really exciting to not only be working with shows, but to work with other industry professionals who understand their business concept and are willing to work with EventMix. "A lot of our farm clients, like Matt and Whitney Shiflet, Mary and Evan Orr and Brooke and Quintus VanderSpuy are young professionals just like we are," John explains. We appreciate their business because we know they could take care of it themselves or rely on some clients within their barn to handle it. But they

have standards, too, and that's what they stress to us. They hire us because it's another level that they want to take things to." When the Fanns do the parties, everyone else gets to sit back, relax and enjoy the show.

"We'll do anything, that's what's so cool. And there are a lot of things to celebrate," Erin says. The Fanns have recently booked their first street festival, a one-night event called FreshTaste. It's an evening of local food, drink and art, working with the local farmers' market association. The goal of the event is to educate people about cooking with local, fresh produce, so several seasonal-menu restaurants will offer food, and a best dish contest will be held. Local breweries and a moonshine distillery will also have stands, and John is planning a wine garden. In addition, they are focusing on young artists' displays, and of course, there will be a band. "It's no different than horse show stuff. At horse shows, we have to position vendors, get with management and deal with any issues. The differences are the barriers because everything has to be within a certain space and the fact that we're dealing with a public municipality rather than a private entity," John explains. That just makes the permits and health and safety regulations all the more serious. "It's going to be the same process and hopefully the same result as our horse show parties," John states.

It might be hard to imagine how two people manage to get all that done, especially while parenting a baby. "We've had people who can't believe we can do everything we do at an event," Erin says. "That was a huge deal for me—to show people we could make it happen." John loves the challenge of trying to do more all the time. But, at the same time, they never let their work get in the way of their relationship or their family. "That's why the organizational factor is so important," says Erin. "No matter how well-planned a party is, there's still something that's going to come up. The more we can have it organized, the more we can take off a layer of stress. If we plan ahead, it just reduces friction between us." It's also part of the service they offer, as they know that if a client sees them stressed, it doesn't reflect well. They maintain the same professional expectations of themselves that they have for their staff members.

Beyond that, they also really want to make the whole thing fun, even for themselves. John fully believes they work so well together because they learned how to have fun over the seven years that they spent together before they got married. During that time, they were able to spend a lot



▲ Bloody Mary bar at the Lenux Stables brunch



▲ Erin taking third in her Equitation age group at Louisville with Reprise



John and Erin biking across the Golden Gate Bridge ▲

of time together, visiting all kinds of places and seeing a variety of things.

"We try to have a lot of fun, whatever we do," says John. "Just like any other work, we do what we do to get it done. At the end of the day, it's all about family." The familial element is actually one of Erin's favorite parts of their business, as she is often able to see her parents at shows, as well as the second family she developed as a young girl showing. That even helps with managing their busy work schedule with raising a baby. Very often, Sandra and Keith Hall are at the shows so that Sandra can take photographs, and they help take care of their granddaughter, Berkeley. Other friends also step up to volunteer, and the Fanns consider themselves incredibly lucky that Berkeley is a happy, willing baby, and will let just about anybody hold her. The other thing that Erin loves about their business is just knowing how happy what they do makes everyone else. "I look forward to seeing everybody at the parties, and seeing how they react. I love to see everybody having a good time," she says.

Even though they work together each and every day, the Fanns make sure they have some time to spend together away from work. They regularly take day trips, often taking Berkeley to the beaches where John spent a lot of his time as a kid surfing. They go to Charleston, South Carolina, and Hilton Head, and enjoy all the different things nearby Clemson has to offer. However, they tend to end up tying work in with play, whether it's arranging a fun day at the end of a work trip, or even planning parties while

they're out to dinner. "Erin doesn't cook, so we go out to dinner a lot," John chuckles. "We get a lot of stuff planned while we're relaxing." It's obvious that they both truly enjoy what they've been able to build together and what they do each and every day. "When the party is over, everyone's gone and everything is a big mess, it's the best feeling. Because everyone is going to say something the next day," says John. The fact that they feel that way is such a blessing, because everything they do, every event they plan, is doing so much for the show horse world.

The multifaceted company, and the services it offers, might be new, but what they're offering to the show horse world is not. It might have the additions of new technology, photography and videography, but really, the Fanns are just trying to offer people a really good time, a time that is both at a horse show and that is away from it, all at the same time. "A lot of people talk about the parties in the 70s and 80s, when parties were really high society and fun, and people looked forward to it," says John. "We're just trying to bring back that feeling and get people to look forward to hanging out and visiting with their friends." EventMix doesn't just offer party planning, photography, videography and promotions—it's a good time, a way to step away from the fierce competition of horse shows. They offer a way to enjoy our community in a way that we have not in some time. We have plenty of fun going on within the show ring; the Fanns are simply bringing that back, outside the ring.