

## May 2015 - Too Tough?

**Courses at the World Cup Finals did not showcase sport at its best.**

by Sydney Callaway • photos by Erpelding Photography



As the dust settles at the Thomas & Mack Center in Las Vegas, horses head home and the make-shift arena is returned to the UNLV basketball court, the time for reflection arises.

The weekend in Las Vegas was filled with entertainment and excitement, from the show jumping to dressage to the nightly entertainment put on by Las Vegas Events. A far cry from dull. However, as I returned each day to the media room at the FEI Longines World Cup Finals, an increasing amount of controversy surrounded the events. In both dressage and show jumping, World Cup Finals brought about a fair amount of heartbreak and distress for both spectators and participants.

The show jumping controversy started early on, during the first round of competition. Thursday night began with the speed leg of the FEI World Cup, with its fair share of thrills and spills. In fact, many believe it was a bit too challenging, as we saw many top riders struggle to get through the course.

Jos Verlooy was the first rider into the ring, producing a clear round in a time of 68.27. However, this proved to be rather deceptive, as the next rider in the ring was eliminated at the triple combination after having a tough go throughout the first half of the course. Next was veteran rider Patrice Delaveau on his highly experienced Orient Express HDC. Although producing a clear round, the horse did not look at ease, sticking off the ground in the triple combination and requiring an incredibly aggressive ride from the Frenchman. Pius Schweitzer, the winner of last year's speed leg, clocked in a fast time of 68.14 but a pair of rails resulted in an adjusted time of 76.14. This was the tone for the rest of the class, with top riders such as Marcus Ehning and Edwina Tops-Alexander retiring from competition that first day. Although there were 13 clear rounds out of the 41 starters, a fair result for the speed day, many riders felt the course was indeed too challenging.

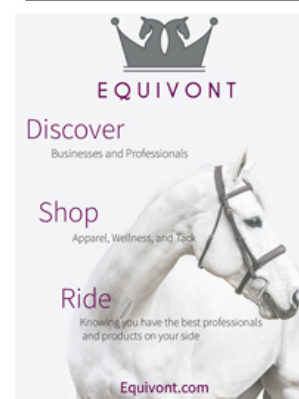
Onto the next day of competition: it was Friday night and the course was a standard Table 2a format with one round and a jump-off. Course designer Anthony D'Ambrosio designed all the Las Vegas courses, having previously designed the Finals in 2003. He kindly guided the press team, myself included, through his course for the night, explaining his thought process through each jump and track, as well as the specific height measurements and his predictions for the night. It was evident that he is extremely passionate about what he does and very tactful in his approach to course designing. Nothing appeared impossible - the fences were not at a max 1.60, as he maintained an even balance between 1.50-1.60 height, with some wide



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Steve Guerdat &amp; Albfuerhren's Paille

spread oxers throughout the course as well.

However, once the course was ridden by the top 35 competitors who qualified for this round, it became evident that the track was deceptively difficult. A large problem for many riders was the track to the triple combinations, which was at the very end of the course. It was a related line from an airy skinny vertical jump in front of the ingate, with either a forward five strides, or a waiting six, to a wide oxer for the A element, one long stride to a tall but more narrow oxer for the B element, and another single stride to the tall vertical on the out of the triple, finishing

to the final fence on course, a tall vertical. It was here that we saw many, many top horse and rider combinations either fail to jump clean, or even make it through. Todd Minikus incurred eight faults before circling on the way to the triple and retiring. We saw many stops within the triple, with many riders struggling to clear the A element, only to end up crashing through B. Katie Laurie of New Zealand stopped at the C, Jack Hardin Towell crashed through B and subsequently retired, and Patrice Delaveau once again had to aggressively maneuver his 2014 WEG silver medal mount through the course before circling out of the triple and retiring as well.

Of the 35 riders, approximately 18 incurred either one or two rails within the triple combination, including last year's World Cup Champion Daniel Deusser, as well as the second, third, fifth and sixth place finishers in the 2015 final results. By the end of the course, there were six clear rounds, however many of these rounds had a fair amount of rubs to go with it, and it seemed near impossible to execute the course in a smooth and efficient fashion.



Vinton Karrasch &amp; Coral Reef Follow Me II

As Friday night came to an end, many people were left with a growing dissatisfaction from the night's results. Yes, the ideal number of clear rounds was produced, and it was a thrilling class to watch. Yet, we saw many unexplainable catastrophic errors occur through the course, and especially in the triple combinations. While courses should always challenge the rider, especially at the level of World Cup Finals, they should also reflect what's fair to the horse and have feasible answers for each combination within the track. Many riders found it impossible to meet the triple off of a forward five strides from the skinny, and staying wide in six strides did not allow them an appropriate approach with enough pace, either. While the course designer said he believed the five was the true, correct answer within that line, many experienced riders did not find that possible. It was then that many riders began to vocalize their opinions on the classes thus far.

On Saturday afternoon, I sat down with Marcus Ehning for a brief interview. Marcus, who has competed at every final since 2001 and has won the title an astonishing three times, brought a relatively inexperienced horse this year. Singular LS La Silla, 9 year old stallion whose spook within the triple combination on the first day led to Marcus choosing to circle out, and retire with a schooling jump.

"For sure, I expected more, and something like that had never happened before... it was just one mistake," he stated. He said that he also did not want to scare his horse, as this was the stallion's first big championship, and wanted to ensure it had only positive experiences. In regards to the courses of the past two days, Marcus admitted, "I was not crazy about the course, for sure not yesterday with the last line. For me it was a bit unfair for the horses. Lyon was must better, the ring was huge, and here it is really small, a special ring, which makes a big difference for a lot of horses. There were a lot of hard faults and that was not very nice for me." The arena proved to be one of the most challenging aspects of the final, with its severely rounded corners and odd bottle neck shape in the ingate, causing horses to get stuck and a bit lost through their turns on this side of the arena.



Lucy Davis &amp; Barron

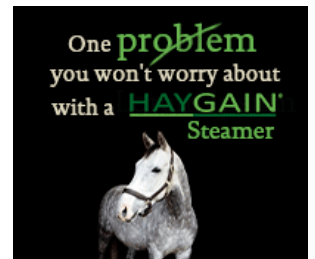
### The Final Day

On the final day, Anthony D'Ambrosio led the media team once more through the first of his two courses for the last leg. This time, the triple was built as the third element on course, and the triple proved to be less of a horse test than a technical question in Round 1 of the third leg. The time allowed was also more of a factor, with the fence heights lingering mostly around 1.60m as the top 30 horse and rider combinations stepped forth to tackle the course. Fifteen horse and rider combinations entered

the ring before Douglas Lindelöw produced the first clear round, followed by Maikel Van Der Vleuten, Beezie Madden, Jos



The Foundation For The Total Health Of Your Horse



Verlooy, Penelope Leprevost, and Steve Geurdat. However, when moving onto the next round, the clear rounds ceased to exist. It seemed every rider struggled in some aspect of the course, unable to answer all the questions the course posed.

McLain Ward and his long time partner Rothschild ended up withdrawing abruptly on the way to fence four, after incurring four faults at fence two, which brought their penalty total to 19, and put them out of contention for a top prize. McLain later took to Facebook to discuss his thoughts on this year's Finals, stating that it was "the most beaten I have felt in any recent memory, I honestly felt I could not find a way to answer the test presented by riding well, forward and smooth. It seems that the majority of the other riders faced the same challenge as I did... I have never seen so many top horses stop, crash and seem totally lost or so many top riders having to pull and kick [their] way to simply get in range of a good distance."

After totaling the amount of faults from the second round on Sunday, there was a total of 200 faults with one rider (McLain) electing to retire, and no clear rounds. Keep in mind, the final round involved only the top 20 of the original 40 competitors, all of whom spent the past year producing consistent results in World Cup classes across the globe in order to earn their spot in the Finals.

It is here at World Cup Finals that we find the world's best competing head to head for the title, yet if none of these riders and horses could produce a clean result on the final round, we must reflect on the possibility that the test put forth was too demanding.

Steve Geurdat, the 2012 Olympic Champion and two-time runner up in World Cup Finals, was crowned the champion in this week's final. He was one of the favorites entering the competition, as well as a truly deserving recipient of the title and one of the most stylish and effective riders in the world. Yet it cannot be ignored that he incurred one very hard rail in the beginning of the course, at 5a, as well as a near crash through the last oxer, which resulted in another rail, leaving him to finish on eight faults. And the second and third placing riders ending on nine. It was this final oxer that got many top horse and riders, as it was one of the largest fences on course, coming out of the corner after an aggressive six stride line, which walked quite normal, but rode very awkwardly for most. Jos Verlooy, the closest to having a clean effort, also had the last oxer down, causing heartbreak for both the young Belgian rider and the crowd.



In the award ceremony and subsequent press conference, Steve appeared elated to finally have the Cup title, and no one can argue just how deserving he is of the title. He was the first to joke about his decision to the last fence, stating that he heard his coach yelling at him to gallop through the turn to avoid any time faults, stating he "felt more like a cow horse rider" than a show jumper on the way to the last fence.

When reflecting on the final day of competition, I realized the truth of McLain's words. There were very few rounds that showcased the best skill set of horse and rider, in sync to produce a clear round in an effortless manner. That, to me, is what show jumping is all about. The final round, as mentioned, resulted in no clear rounds. Comparing these results to the Finals in Lyon last year, there were four double clear rounds and a total of 155 faults from the final round. Factoring away the four clear rounds in Lyon, the average number of faults comes to an estimate of 9.6. This is fairly similar to the mean results from Sunday's final round, with the average rider incurring 10.5 faults, factoring out the one withdraw. Yet, if you go back and watch the rounds from Lyon, there's a stark contrast between these two finals. In Lyon, the faults incurred were less the result of "hard faults" and awkward approaches, but rather light technical errors. It would be impossible to argue that the riding level of the riders within the competition has changed drastically since last year, as we saw many repeat faces from Lyon to Las Vegas, as well as a field of 18 Olympians. Riders from the highest of skill level felt pushed too far.

I have the utmost respect for the course designer this week, as his passion and talent for course designing is recognized by all. However we must also listen to what the riders have to say, and take steps to produce a platform that allows for the top competitors to shine on their way to victory. As McLain concluded, "This week's designer was a great rider and has been a top designer but just as we as riders and trainers must reflect on the jobs we do and our own performance so must course designers to create a test that not only challenges the best but also produced great and fair sport."

McLain ended his Facebook post with a heartfelt congratulations to Steve Geurdat. His post was quickly re-shared hundreds of times, and received thousands of "likes" and comments of agreements from other top riders, including three-time World Cup Champion Rodrigo Pessoa and fellow 2015 World Cup finalist, Kristen Coe.

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**Dressage Surprises: Favorite pair's elimination was not the upset Americans were hoping for.**



*Steffen Peters & Legolas 92*

Nobody was expecting a surprise in the results of the Reem Acra Dressage World Cup Finals. Charlotte Dujardin and Valegro made light work of heavy expectations by winning with a freestyle that scored almost 10 percentage points over that of runner-up Edward Gal and Glock's Undercover N.O.P. Charlotte and Valegro, of Great Britain, are the reigning World Cup, European and Olympic champions, so their jaw-dropping performance and 94.196 score were in line with the outside expectations everyone has for this pair.

What did surprise everybody, in the most heartbreaking way, was the elimination of Steffen Peters and Legolas 92. This was due to a bit of blood detected on Legolas' side when they exited the arena after a new freestyle that would have landed them in fourth place with an 80.35. FEI horse welfare rules dictate elimination in such cases and Steffen accepted it with the grace he's demonstrated throughout his career.



*Charlotte Dujardin & Valegro.*

He addressed the matter the day it happened on his Facebook page. "I'm truly sorry about my elimination from the 2015 World Cup Finals in Las Vegas. I'm clearly responsible for this. There was absolutely no doubt that all FEI Stewards, Dr. Mike Tomlinson and the president of the ground Jury, Lilo Fore, made the correct decision. Legolas is a sensitive horse, because of this I ride with a dull rounded end spur without rowels. I cannot explain when it happened, and I feel terrible for Legolas. I feel guilty and extremely embarrassed, and apologize to Akiko and Jerry, (Legolas' owners) our Federation and our friends and supporters. But still very proud of Legolas who did a wonderful job in the Grand Prix and in the Freestyle."

Behind Charlotte and Edward, Jessica von Bredow-Werndl of Germany and Unee BB finished third with an 80.464 score. America's second pair, Laura Graves and Verdades, of Florida, wound up a super respectable fourth with a 79.124.

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