

World Pony Championships 14-17 July 2005 Catton Park, Derbyshire ~ England

For the first time the World Pony Driving Championships were held in England in the beautiful grounds of Catton Park, Derbyshire. Steeped in history, Catton Park provided a perfect backdrop to the unfolding sporting drama. The gardens, formal to the front and with mixed borders at the back of the Hall, run down to the River Trent.

Teams from 20 countries including America, Australia and Great Britain provided stiff competition to the defending champions Germany as the world's top drivers skilfully tackled the three demanding phases of dressage, the marathon and obstacles and the cones driving.

Spectators were never far away from the action as the immaculately prepared ponies competed in singles, pairs and teams.

Vet Check

On Wednesday morning all competitors presented their ponies for veterinary inspection to confirm their start at the Championships. A simple walk and trot-up before the vet, the Australian Team single ponies driven by Henry Crossley and Lyn Cunnew – successfully passed their vet check and were cleared to enter the competition.

Opening Ceremony

Wednesday evening the Opening Ceremony was staged with an official royal welcome from HRH Prince Philip and also the FEI Director of Carriage Driving, Mr Richard Nicoll (USA). Each country paraded into the main arena (in alphabetical order) led by a member of their team in full presentation harness.

The Australian Team was led by Henry Crossley driving the palomino pony, Toby, followed by groom and wife Shirley Crossley, then Lyn and her groom Laura Jay. Marching with them were fellow Australians Debra Hatton (Chef d' Equipe) and husband Geoff, together with assistant groom and pony pairs driver, Janelle Marshall of South Australia.

The Presentation and Dressage

A spectacular start, on Thursday 14 and Friday 15 July, to the competition saw competitors in their finery as they performed the Dressage Test; a series of movements that highlights the obedience, suppleness and balance of the ponies. Under the watchful eye of the judges, penalty points are given when the ponies and drivers fall even marginally short of the exacting standards expected. Marking: each movement is awarded marks out of 10. At the end, all points are added and the total is subtracted from 150 (maximum score) to give the final mark. The competitor with the lowest mark is therefore the winner of the dressage phase.

Australian single pony drivers, Henry Crossley (Peterborough, SA) and Lyn Cunnew (Bundanoon, NSW) who had been training with Boyd Exell with two leased ponies just one month prior to the competition, were grateful for the assistance given by well-known drivers and owners of the pony Toby, Randy and Keady Cadwell of the USA. The Cadwell sisters were

invaluable to Henry and Lyn as they fine-tuned the relationships between drivers and their ponies in the lead up to the Worlds.

The main dressage arena (100m x 40m) was set in front of the majestic Catton Hall residence with five judge's boxes at markers C, R, S, V and P. Judges were Ge Konig (NED), Diana Brownlie (GBR), Martha Hanks-Nicoll (USA), Hans-Peter Ruschlin (SUI) and Mark Wentein (BEL).

Gathering their wits and burying their nerves Lyn and Henry both managed to complete their tests in respectable form. Although finishing well down the list, Lyn and Henry were both relieved to complete the first phase of the competition with no mishaps!

A total of 36 competitors contested the Single Pony class. The standings after the dressage included Yvonne de Ruyter (NED) 1st, Peter Koux (DEN) 2nd and Suzy Stafford (USA) 3rd.

The Pony Pairs class had 24 competitors in total with Ewoud Boom (NED) coming 1st, Steffen Abicht (GER) 2nd and Rupert Ganhör (AUT) 3rd.

The Four-in-Hand class had a total of 21 entrants with Mia Allo (BEL) and her palomino pony team winning in fine style followed by Tobias Bücken (GER) 2nd and Bart Verdroncken (BEL) third.

The Marathon & Obstacles

The driver and pony against time and the elements; three gruelling sections, on Saturday 16 July the course covered the most testing terrain over a distance of 20 kilometres. The driver and navigator, map in hand, follow the course undertaking trot and walk sections in specific times. Finally, it is on to the hazards – a series of man-made and natural obstacles that need to be driven as hard and fast as the driver's nerve will allow.

Now the pressure is really starting to build: failure to achieve the specified times for each section and every additional second negotiating the hazards accrue penalty points.

There were a total of eight marathon obstacles (hazards) each with a different design and theme for the drivers to negotiate... Perhaps the most exciting from the spectators' view were MO2 and MO7.

Hazard 2 was an American Indian theme complete with tee-pees and carved wooden life-size animals set on the side of a steep descent. This obstacle proved disastrous for some drivers as they negotiated tight turns – at speed – on the side of a hill. Roll-overs of several vehicles (thankfully, no-one was hurt) provided dramatic action for spectators.

Hazard 7 was the 'Splish Splash' – two separate areas of water with various elements including brightly coloured wooden boats and concrete pipes full of geraniums. Access to the first gate forced drivers and ponies over a large (and steep) wooden bridge leading directly into the water with a huge splash. Pity any pony afraid of bridges and water, as there was no alternative to avoid either! This obstacle provided spectators and photographers with the best vantage points for photos of the action and loud cheering.

Lyn and Henry both came positively through the Marathon safely and respectably. Lyn managed to finish in 20th place after this phase as her leased pony, Dylan, really found his feet and gave his all.

The Marathon proved too much for two drivers in the Single Pony class; Dressage winner Yvonne de Ruyter (NED) and the Italian driver Salvatore Pacifico were unfortunately eliminated in this phase. However, reining Marathon winner from the previous World Championships (Austria 2003) – Ann-Christine Arvidsson of Sweden blitzed the field, won the Marathon and moved up to 4th position overall. Second place went to Dirk van Beckhoven (NED) and Susan Denney (GBR) came third.

The Pony Pairs class saw leading British driver, Jo Rennison, win the Marathon followed closely by Steffen Abicht (GER) and Peter Borgmann (GER). Arnot Loercher of Germany retired from this class bringing the total to 23 drivers completing the marathon.

Champion Dutch team driver Aart van de Kamp Snr and his coloured Shetland pony team won the Four-in-Hand class followed by Dirk Gerkens (GER). Third place for the Marathon went to Aart van de Kamp Jnr who also drives a team of coloured Shetlands – black and white mice everywhere! Unfortunately two drivers retired – Thomas Koeppen (GER) and Gilles Arriat (FRA) leaving 19 drivers overall.

The Cones Driving

The final day, Sunday 17 July, featured the Precision Cones phase of the competition. As the closely fought contest built to an exciting climax, against the clock teamwork is everything as driver and pony tackled the exacting and twisting course that takes them through the cones. Five penalty points are accrued for every ball that is knocked down from its precarious position on top of each cone. Those leading the day before can fall behind in a split second as a carriage wheel skims a vital cone – a championship lost!

The cones course was held in the main arena and contained a total of 19 sets of cones. Sponsored by Lexus, their latest model four-wheel drive took pride of place in the centre of the arena. Every set of cones was decorated with a bright pot of flowers both sides and the two grandstands were overflowing with spectators.

The course filled the entire main arena and featured a variety of testing and technical turns including a serpentine, zig-zag and tricky decisions for the drivers.

Conducted in reverse order, Henry and Toby were the first of the Aussies to enter the arena with Lyn and Dylan following a few competitors later. During her round, Lyn had a slight incident where, after the 4th element, it appeared that the pony Dylan might have put one hind leg over a trace... He had brushed his two hind fetlocks together on a sharp turn. The bell sounded and they had to wait nearly two gut-wrenching minutes while the judge considered the situation. At last the decision was made to allow Lyn to continue from where she left-off. As a consequence two cones were brought down and she incurred time penalties. Henry had a respectable round with only one ball down and several time penalties but it didn't matter – Lyn and Henry had completed the competition – they had successfully flown the Australian flag at the World Championships!

Overall Results

After the Cones Phase Suzy Stafford (USA) had moved into 1st place overall and winning the Championship. Dirk van Beckhoven (NED) won the silver medal and bronze went to Ann-Christine Arvidsson of Sweden.

The Pony Pairs class saw Steffen Abicht (GER) take the Championship gold medal followed by Austrian driver Rupert Ganhör taking silver and then bronze to Danish pairs driver Lars Dau.

The pony Four-in-Hand class Dirk Gerkens of Germany convincingly won Champion. Fellow German driver, Tobias Bücken, won the silver medal and bronze went deservedly to the Dutch driver Aart van de Kamp Snr.

It's interesting to note that of the 81 drivers who started at Catton Hall, just 74 completed the competition. Overall scores for the winners of each class were within 30 penalties of each other showing that even though the skills required by the drivers of Single Ponies, Pony Pairs and Four-in-Hand are very different, the standard of driving is comparable!

Finale

The Closing Ceremony was something to remember on Sunday afternoon with the stands full and the crowd still in attendance. All the nations paraded back into the arena for the official closing of the 2005 World Pony Driving Championships.

After a wonderful four days of exciting world-class carriage driving, Richard Nicoll, Technical Delegate for the competition, applauded the drivers for their attendance and sportsmanship and then HRH Prince Philip farewelled everyone for a safe journey home. Everybody then filed once around the arena to the cheers and applause of the crowd.

The venue for the next World Pony Driving Championships in 2007 has yet to be named and while that's being decided, let's hope that Australia considers preparing another national team of pony drivers to once again participate in this fabulous equestrian sport.

---000---