

Back-to-back WEF Challenge Cup wins for Eric Lamaze

For the second week in a row, Schomberg's Eric Lamaze and Chacco Kid won the \$35,000 Equinimity WEF Challenge Cup. The event is held each Thursday of the 12-week Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Florida. Having laid claim to victory in Round II, Lamaze and Chacco Kid returned to the International Arena Jan. 25 to win Round III.

The previous Thursday saw Lamaze score his first win of the 2018 season, claiming victory over 109 starters.

Lamaze, a three-time Olympic medalist, was defending his title last week, as he had also won the WEF Challenge Cup Round III in 2017 riding Houston for owner Artisan Farms. His victory marked the 25th WEF Challenge Cup win of Lamaze's career, tying him with McLain Ward of the U.S. for the most all-time wins.

Canadian course designer Peter Grant set the tracks for week three, which yielded 26 clear rounds from an 84-horse starting field. Lamaze turned in an impressive jump-off performance, jumping clear in a time of 40.02 seconds that would prove unbeatable.

Marilyn Little of the U.S. came closest to catching Lamaze, stopping the clock in 41.37 aboard Clearwater while four-time U.S. Olympic medalist Beezie Madden placed third with a time of 42.28 seconds riding HHS Hercules. Two-time Canadian Olympian Tiffany Foster of North Vancouver, B.C., also jumped double clear to finish fourth with a time of 42.46 riding Brighton for Andy and Carlene Ziegler's Artisan Farms.

Lamaze once again found himself leading the WEF Challenge Cup victory gallop with Chacco Kid. Paired with Lamaze for two years, the 12-year-old Oldenburg gelding is owned by the Chacco Kid Group, comprised of Sara and Rick Mershad, Carol and Ludi Sollak, and Carlene and Andy Ziegler.

"To compare the two different weeks, I thought the course last week was more technical, only producing nine clear while today's course was more straightforward with a generous time allowed," Lamaze, 49, said.

"I'm really happy to have Chacco Kid in my string of horses, and I'm really happy for the Chacco Kid Group to be rewarded with two wins in a row with this horse that they entrusted to me," Lamaze added. "Last year I didn't really take any chances with him in the jump-off, but now he's learning to go fast so I thought 'why not?' This is an opportunity to get to know your horse and to take some chances. If you are ever in a situation where it is the largest prize money or the biggest competition in the world, you're going to feel better taking some risks as you know that you've done it before."

Experience is something Lamaze knows all about, having competed in six consecutive World Championships and three Olympic Games, including 2008 when he was the Olympic Champion riding Hickstead. A respected coach as well as athlete, Lamaze is known for having brought numerous young riders up to the top level of show jumping sport and is currently working with several highly-competitive students. One of those students is Spencer Smith of the United States, who placed 10th in last Thursday's event, riding Rivale du Barquet.

"I'm really proud of Spencer; he is showing tremendous progress and is really coming into his own," said Lamaze of his 21-year-old student. "In the one year that I have been training him, Spencer has learned so much and is showing great maturity in his riding." The event the previous Thursday had Mexican course designer Oscar Soberon whittled the enormous 109-horse starting field down to nine for the tie-breaking jump-off. None were faster than Lamaze and Chacco Kid, with the pair stopping the clock in the winning time of 34.68 seconds. Remarkably, there was a three-way tie for second place as Emanuele Camilli of Italy, along with Cian O'Connor and Paul O'Shea, both of Ireland, crossed the timers in exactly 36.76 seconds.

Lamaze concluded his 2017 show season by competing at CSI5* events in Paris, France, and Geneva, Switzerland, in December, before relocating to Florida for the winter season.

"Every year at the start of WEF, I use a horse that is coming off Paris and Geneva; rather than give them a rest, I keep them going and compete with them in Florida as they are already in form," he explained. "For a lot of the riders, their horses have been on a lay-off. Today's class was very competitive, with 109 starters, but it was nice for Chacco Kid to do a round at a lower height of 1.45 metres than he was jumping in Paris and Geneva. When it comes to the jump-off, he has the experience going fast, I know him well and I don't mind taking some risks that perhaps a year ago I wasn't comfortable doing."

"The development of this horse has been a little backwards," explained Lamaze of Chacco Kid's progression since 2016. "Although he had been ridden by good riders in Colombia, he had never been exposed to big international shows. He was very inexperienced that way but, with it being an Olympic year, we wanted to save my Olympic horse, Fine Lady 5, as much as possible. Normally you would have him start out competing at 1.45 metres, but he ended up doing the big Nations' Cups in Aachen and Rome, and the grand prix at La Baule, so it went a little backwards. Now I'm doing what we should have done in the beginning. He has the biggest heart, and always tries 100 per cent. It is very impressive what this little horse has done."

While Lamaze is usually based in Wellington for the duration of the winter season, his competition schedule is a little different for

2018.

"I will have a different strategy this year as I'm going to do the Rolex show in 's-Hertogenbosch, Holland, as well as the Global Champions Tour in Mexico City, which are both in March. I'm planning my winter season around those two events," said Lamaze, who splits his time between training bases in Wellington and Brussels, Belgium. "I did quite a bit of the Global Champions Tour last year, and I really enjoyed being part of the Hamburg Diamonds team with Harrie Smolders, Audrey Coulter and Jos Verlooy; it was great to be among great riders and enjoy good team spirit. Of course, we have World Championships to think about this year as well. You try to target one or two horses towards that, keep competing and pick the one that is performing the best at the time."

In the meantime, Lamaze is building on his success by adding more horses to his competition roster. Last year, he put together a group of owners to purchase Jewel 8, a nine-year-old Belgian Warmblood mare, and continues to strengthen his stable with horsepower.

"We have some promising young horses coming up, including Viva, a new mare that I think a lot of," said Lamaze, who was double clear earlier last Thursday in the 1.45-metre competition riding Viva. "I have another new nine-year-old that is spectacular, so we are adding some new horses to our string thanks to the continuing support of Andy and Carlene Ziegler of Artisan Farms, as well as some wonderful new owners who have gotten behind me. It's very exciting!"



Eric Lamaze and Chacco Kid earned back-to-back \$35,000 Equinimity WEF Challenge Cup wins on January 25 at the Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Florida. Photo by Starting Gate Communications