

Canada's Chris von Martels claims individual bronze medal

Chris von Martels of Ridgetown, Ontario, claimed the individual bronze medal in dressage freestyle competition held Tuesday at the OLG Caledon Pan Am Equestrian Park in Palgrave.

Following a hotly contested team final that saw the United States edge Canada for the gold medal, 21 athletes returned Tuesday to determine the individual medals. Von Martels and Zilverstar went from strength to strength, producing a fluid, energetic test set to music by U2. The five-member panel of judges rewarded the pair with a score of 79.5 per cent, giving von Martels the individual bronze medal.

"I'm obviously very happy and thrilled with Zilverstar," said von Martels of his 11-year-old bay Dutch Warmblood gelding sired by Rousseau. "He has been absolutely fantastic throughout the whole Games here. He is peaking at the right moment, and I am very proud of him for being able to come onto the international scene and shine like he has."

Von Martels was in good company in his major games debut, as United States Equestrian Team veterans Steffen Peters and Laura Graves claimed the individual gold and silver medals. Peters, a three-time Olympian, rode Legolas 92 to the winning score of 80.075 per cent while Graves, who made waves at last year's Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games in France by placing fifth individually, earned a score of 79.825 per cent for silver riding Verdades.

For von Martels, earning personal best scores in all three phases in front of a home crowd was a thrill.

"I'm very proud," said von Martels, 32. "Our home town audience is, of course, very fanatical and supportive, which is a boost."

"I think it paints a clear picture that we are really competitive on the international scene," von Martels commented, continuing to speak of the Canadian Dressage Team's strong results at these Games. "Not only here in Canada, but in Europe or the U.S. We have proven at this competition that we are absolutely right on track with the rest of the top countries of the world."

Von Martels was also impressed with the facility in which they were competing.

"I think the facility is world class," he said. "As a Canadian, I was very proud to say this is our home."

Canada's other two representatives, Belinda Trussell and Brittany Fraser, both received a score of 76.8 per cent. Using the artistic marks to break the tie, Trussell was placed fourth while Fraser earned fifth. Trussell choreographed the required technical movements for the grand prix freestyle to an original composition by Arlene Bynon and Dave Grein. Her freestyle choreography featured an impressive piaffe and passage tour that started her test with Anton, a 15-year-old dark bay Sachsen-Anhaltiner gelding owned by Robyn Eames and Marc Trussell, on a high note.

"That part of the test felt really great; it's so fun to ride!" said Trussell, 43. "My goal here was to get three personal bests and that's what happened. I found out that my score from the Grand Prix Special on Sunday is a Canadian record at a major games. I'm pretty excited about that!"

Hailing from nearby Stouffville, Trussell enjoyed being supported by a home audience, as well as her family and friends.

"It was so great, it was like a sea of red!" said the Canadian Olympian. "I love it! With all the flags, it was sensational. It is what I have dreamed of doing for a long time."

Fraser of New Glasgow, N.S., was also thrilled with her top-five placing in her major games debut. She has been partnered with All In, a 10-year-old liver chestnut Dutch Warmblood gelding owned in partnership with Marc-Andre Beaulieu, since purchasing him at an auction in The Netherlands in 2010.

"I think it was an amazing experience for me and our team," Fraser, 26, said of her major games debut, "I had great teammates. We are all good friends. The support behind us has been incredible. It's amazing for my first team experience to get personal bests, and 76 percent in the freestyle is awesome!"

At her first major games in the role of chef d'equipe, Alison Martin was thrilled with the Canadian team's performance.

"They rode exceptionally well," she said. "So many personal bests were achieved this week. They fought hard and I really feel they came out with an excellent experience."

"They were excited about showing on home turf, having a major games in their home country and, for Megan and Belinda, in their hometown," she added. "They felt super supported. They were totally energized by the opportunity to show here, and the fact that we were fighting for gold."



Chris von Martels, aboard Zilverstar, acknowledged the cheers from the crowd after his individual performance in dressage Tuesday. It put him in first place, but this was before his American rivals Steffen Peters and Laura Graves took to the ring. Photo by Bill Rea