

Dressage masterclass ? Carl Hester wows the crowd in Caledon

When Carl Hester comes to town, the dressage community takes notice.

More than 1,200 eager spectators packed the Caledon Equestrian Park one recent weekend for the first of a two-day masterclass hosted by the British Olympic gold medallist.

Nine Canadian horse-rider combinations, ranging from the FEI Four-Year-Old level to Grand Prix, enjoyed the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have a lesson from one of the world's leading competitors and trainers. The day began with a pair of four-year-olds: Iron Butterfly, ridden by Erin MacQuarrie of Norton, New Brunswick, and Ismeaux, ridden by Andrea Bresee of Uxbridge. Maya Markowski was next in the ring aboard Something Royal, a five-year-old mare owned by Fiona McLellan. The FEI Six-Year-Old level was capably demonstrated by Cecile von Martels on her stallion Captain, My Captain.

Two-time Canadian Olympian Jacqueline Brooks shared the ring with Kahla Ishoy to work on Third and Fourth Level requirements with their young horses. Instead of her popular Grand Prix partner D Niro, Jacqueline opted to bring her young horse Emmett Top to the clinic, a half-brother to the world-famous Valegro. Ishoy rode Sakima, an eight-year-old Hanoverian gelding owned by her mother, Canadian Olympic dressage medallist Cindy Ishoy.

Though one of the four-year-olds was understandably overwhelmed by the large crowds and electric atmosphere, the young horses all handled the unusual environment extremely well. Hester was able to hone in on one or two specific areas needing attention with each rider, and the audience saw a clear improvement in every horse by the end of each session.

Before breaking for lunch, spectators enjoyed a demonstration ride by British young rider Rebecca Edwards. Edwards, who trains with Hester, was a member of the British Young Rider team at the 2017 European Championships and earned the Under 25s Star of the Future Award in 2016. For this clinic, she was offered the choice between two horses owned by Canadian FEI Junior rider Allison Youngdale, and chose to ride Ramiro, a 2007 Danish Warmblood gelding.

?We wanted to put Becky on a horse she'd never ridden before, and demonstrate to the audience what it's like when you go to try a horse for sale that you've never ridden,? Hester said. ?Becky is used to hotter horses, so today we chose a less hot horse. It's an interesting test for the audience to see how she handles a horse that she doesn't know at all and who is not her usual type. She did a lovely job and by the end of the ride had the horse going very nicely indeed.?

Upper-level horses took over the ring in the afternoon, beginning with Young Rider Vanessa Creech-Terauds of Hagersville, riding Fleur de Lys owned by Louise Leatherdale. Next up was Toronto area rider Karis van Essen and Camistry J, a horse she has trained herself to the Intermediare II level. The final rider of the day was Jaimey Irwin of Stoney Lake Equestrian aboard Donegal V. The pair wowed the crowd with their ease in the Grand Prix movements as they worked on transitions from piaffe to passage.

Judging from the thunderous applause at the end of the clinic, the spectators judged the day to be a great success.

Hester agreed.

?We had a great day with some lovely horses, talented riders, and a superb facility for this clinic,? he said. ?The horses and riders were each able to demonstrate what we wanted to see at each level, but we weren't looking for perfection. My job is to find areas where I can help them improve, but not completely change the way they ride, otherwise they'd be in trouble when I go home on Sunday night. I was particularly impressed with the way the two young riders ? Vanessa and Becky ? performed. It's very exciting to have that kind of talent developing for the future.?

The second day of the clinic Sunday had dressage enthusiasts from coast to coast gathered to enjoy the masterclass with Hester.

The morning session focused on the development and training of the young horse, with Hester sharing his tips and personal philosophy on young horse training and care in between teaching sessions. First in the ring were Bresee and MacQuarrie with their mounts Ismeaux and Iron Butterfly. Hester noted improvements in both horses from the day before, particularly with MacQuarrie's young mare who was overwhelmed by the atmosphere Saturday but gave a lovely, relaxed performance Sunday.

Tina Irwin of Stouffville, a silver medalist at the 2011 Pan American Games, represented the five-year-olds with Simsalabim, while Jane Fraser of Halifax and her horse Banjo GCF represented the six-year-olds. Hester was impressed with both young horses, joking several times that he'd like to take them back to England with him.

Brooks shared the ring with Ishoy again Sunday to work on Third and Fourth Level requirements with their talented young geldings Emmett and Sakima. Hester built on the exercises from the previous day and pushed both riders to perfect the basics to improve their higher-level movements.

Edwards closed out the morning session with a demonstration ride on Cosima, a 2005 Holsteiner mare owned by Canadian junior rider Allison Youngdale.

?This mare was completely different from the mare we asked Becky to ride yesterday,? Hester said. ?I think it's a really valuable

exercise for the audience to see her dealing with the same kind of issues they all likely struggle with too, only we can hide it better on our own horses. Becky had to figure out what works for this particular horse and by the end was showing a completely different picture than the beginning. It was very well done.?

The afternoon schedule read like a 'who's who' of Canadian dressage, beginning with 2001 Pan Am Games silver medallist Tom Dvorak of Hillsburgh and Cyrus, a Prix St. Georges-level horse owned by Carla Bahr. Next in the ring was Megan Lane of Deer Ridge Equestrian in Loretto. Audiences are used to seeing Lane aboard her 2016 Olympic partner Caravella, but for this clinic she chose to bring Denver, a spectacular nine-year-old KWPN gelding whom she plans to debut at the Grand Prix level next season. Brittany Fraser of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, was the final rider of the day aboard her impressive Dutch gelding All In. Hester was wowed by the horse the minute he walked in the ring, commenting on his size, presence and talent, and opining that he was better than several of the horses currently ranked in the world's top 10. Truly an exciting pair for Canada's future. Hester helped Fraser 'currently the top-ranked Canadian on the FEI world dressage standings' perfect several of the Grand Prix movements, including pirouettes, passage and piaffe.

'What a spectacular way to end our Canadian clinic,' Hester enthused at a press conference following the event. 'All In is a very special horse, a real rarity. It was wonderful that Brittany could come and share him with the audience.'

'I thought today was brilliant,' he continued. 'It's always lovely to go through all the levels right from the youngest horses to the top. At all levels we saw some wonderful horses and had a great bunch of riders who were very receptive to learning. They made my job easy.'

'It's so amazing to learn from someone who is so good at what they do, that they can be incredibly clear in their teaching,' Brooks said Saturday. 'Carl goes right to the root of the problem, provides a solution, and gives us exercises to work on at home so we can continue to improve in the days to come. He is simply brilliant. I also can't thank Craig Collins, Helen Dillon and the entire team at Caledon Equestrian Park enough for organizing and hosting the clinic at their amazing facility.'

Jane Fraser, who travelled to Caledon with her horse all the way from Nova Scotia just for the opportunity to ride in the masterclass, was delighted with the weekend.

'The clinic was a tremendous learning experience,' she said. 'An opportunity to test my knowledge and ability and to learn from a master who has proven the depth of his knowledge with horse after horse after horse. Watching the progression of the dressage horse through all the levels is a powerful learning tool and seeing how every movement connects and moves the horse to the next level is like getting to peek behind the wizard's curtain. It was magical.'