

Eric Lamaze scores back-to-back Grand Prix victories

It was another great week for Eric Lamaze.

One week after his stunning win in the \$200,000 Grand Prix of La Baule, France, the Schomberg resident made it two in a row by claiming the \$200,000 Grand Prix of Rome Sunday. That came on the heels of another victory the opening day of the event last Thursday.

When Lamaze won the \$200,000 Grand Prix of La Baule May 18 riding Powerplay, it marked his first five-star victory since his partnership with Hickstead. In twist of fate, Lamaze also won the Grand Prix of La Baule and the Grand Prix of Rome back-to-back in 2011 with Hickstead, just months before the great stallion's tragic and unexpected death.

"After La Baule, everyone was saying that Zigali would win in Rome, but I didn't think it was possible; it's so hard to win these grand prix events, especially with two different horses," Lamaze commented. "Winning in La Baule gave me a lot of confidence coming into this week but, when you're on another horse, it's quite different."

Having used Zigali P S as a second horse to Powerplay in European competition this spring, Lamaze decided it was time for Zigali P S to step into the spotlight for Sunday's Grand Prix.

Fifty of the world's top ranked riders started the event in the hopes of winning, with 13 advancing to the all-deciding second round. When Lamaze entered the arena, he was chasing the time of 42.26 seconds set by Dutchman Frank Schuttert. Demonstrating yet again why he was crowned the Olympic Champion, Lamaze shaved almost a full second off the leading time, stopping the clocks in 41.29 seconds. Next in, British legend Michael Whitaker came within fractions of catching Lamaze but, in the end, his time of 41.31 seconds with Viking would only prove good enough for second place.

"Zigali is a super-fast horse, he can leave strides out and can keep his jump," Lamaze said, praising of the 10-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding purchased by Carlene and Andy Ziegler's Artisan Farms last November.

Last Thursday saw Lamaze open the five-star event in Rome with a win in the \$24,000 1.50m Premio 3, riding Zigali P S.

A total of 64 horses contested the event, with 26 qualifying for the jump-off. As the second rider back for the tie-breaker, Lamaze laid down a clear round in a time of 37.67 seconds. It was a long wait as 24 more horse-rider combinations attempted to better his time, but none were able to catch the top-ranked Canadian rider. Two Frenchmen came closest, with Simon Delestre clocking in at 38 seconds flat with Ryan des Hayettes and Kevin Staut placing third after posting a time of 38.62 with Oh d'Eole.

"I knew it was going to be quite fast with 26 in the jump-off, and Zigali is fast to begin with," Lamaze commented. "Fences one and two were new fences for the jump-off; I was fast to number one and just kept going. It set me up for the round, and I was able to leave strides out in several lines. It was a good opening day in Rome."

This was the first show where Zigali was the lead horse for Lamaze.

"It's nice that he has a chance to be put in the position of doing the grand prix this week," he observed. "The last few shows, it was all Powerplay for the big classes. Everything leading up to this has set Zigali up to do this; Florida and these first few shows in Europe really gave me a chance to get to know him. Now it gets a little more serious for Zigali."

"Zigali won the first day, and then he wins again today," an astonished Lamaze declared after Sunday's victory. "It's incredible! The first class he wins from 64 starters, and then he wins this one, too! For Zigali to come to Rome, a five-star event, and to compete in two classes and to win both, and for me to win my first five-star grand prix with him, is unbelievable!"

Following the death of Hickstead, Lamaze continued on with a heavy heart, competing for the fifth-placed Canadian Team at the 2012 London Olympics before taking a step back from the sport. Following a rebuilding phase, he is now back at the top of his game, winning two of the most prestigious grand prix events in the world.

"The faith I had in these horses is paying off," he remarked. "We are really clicking; everything is coming together between myself and the horses. I've spent time really getting to know them, and the moment has come now. Yes, I won these two events before with Hickstead, but to do it again now with two different horses really shows the depth of horses that we have. With the Ziegler family behind us purchasing these great horses, I can't help but to feel like we're back in the sport."

In Rome, Lamaze competed alongside fellow Canadian Tiffany Foster of Vancouver. Lamaze and Foster are both based full-time with Artisan Farms in Vrasene, Belgium, and Wellington, Florida.

Next up for Lamaze is the CSI5* Global Champions Tour in Hamburg, Germany, from May 28 to June 1. With strong results already this season in Antwerp and Madrid, Lamaze is the current leader of the Global Champions Tour standings.

Following Hamburg, Lamaze and Team Artisan will fly more than 30 horses to Calgary to compete throughout the Spruce Meadows Summer Series, Lamaze's favourite show jumping venue in the world.