

Eric Lamaze wins \$216,000 Ariat Grand Prix

It was a good week for Canadian Olympic Champion Eric Lamaze of Schomberg. It concluded Sunday with him winning the \$216,000 Ariat Grand Prix during the CSI4* Winter Equestrian Festival (WEF) Week Four in Wellington, Florida.

Riding Check Picobello Z, Lamaze claimed his second victory of the week. Last Thursday saw the pair top the \$35,000 Ruby et Violette WEF Challenge Cup Round IV, marking Lamaze's third consecutive victory in the weekly event. That win qualified him to be among the 40 starters for Sunday's feature.

Brazilian course designer Guilherme Jorge, who will also handle course designing duties at the upcoming 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, set a challenging track that produced five clear rounds. Coming back for the jump-off, Lamaze and Check Picobello Z turned in a time of 43.65 seconds to take the win over 2012 Olympic team gold medalist Nick Skelton of Great Britain, who crossed the timers in 45.52 seconds riding Untouched. Marilyn Little, who most recently represented the United States Equestrian Team in eventing competition, rounded out the top three with a time of 46.20 seconds riding Corona 93.

"I was thrilled with him on Thursday, winning a WEF was already a big step up for him, but this is another level; it's much higher fences," said Lamaze of the 10-year-old grey Zangersheide gelding owned by Artisan Farms and Torrey Pines Stable. "This is by far the biggest thing he has ever had to do. To come out with a grand prix win at the beginning of circuit, I couldn't be happier with him."

"He's a bit of a different horse, he's not the easiest to manoeuvre around but, in the end, he takes care of the fences for me," continued Lamaze of the horse purchased as a seven-year-old from Ilan Ferder. "It is the only jump-off at this height of 1.60 metres that he has ever done. Last year, I got into a few jump-offs in the 1.50 metres, but he was empty coming back and didn't quite understand what the second round was for. He used to be an overachiever in the first round and be empty for the jump-off. This year, he seems to have grown-up a bit. He's learning how to compete and he's learning how to come back for the jump-off. At the moment, he's giving me a lot of confidence that he can stay off the fences."

Lamaze was especially pleased that the \$216,000 Ariat Grand Prix was held Sunday afternoon rather than Saturday night under the lights when the majority of WEF grand prix classes are held.

"It's nice to see a grand prix for good money on a Sunday afternoon," said Lamaze, 47. "Always having them at night is a little bit unfair to some horses as every horse is different under the lights. It's nice to have a big grand prix during the daytime to even out the playing field for everyone."

In the meantime, Lamaze and his owners, Andy and Carlene Ziegler of Artisan Farms, are enjoying great success so far at the Winter Equestrian Festival. Lamaze took two victories in the WEF Challenge Cup Rounds II and III with Rosana du Park, and has now scored two more major victories during WEF Week Four with Check Picobello Z. In addition, his 2015 Pan American Games gold medal teammate Tiffany Foster of Vancouver placed eighth in the \$216,000 Ariat Grand Prix riding Southwind VDL for Artisan Farms. Having also placed eighth in Thursday's WEF Challenge Cup Round IV with Artisan Farms' Brighton, Foster was awarded the Martha W. Jolicoeur Leading Lady Rider title for WEF Week Four.

"Check Picobello was a horse that we purchased as a seven-year-old and developed and, in the last four weeks, both he and Rosana du Park have won two classes each," noted Lamaze. "Tiffany has also been enjoying strong results and our top horses have not even come out yet. I think it really speaks to the depth of our stable, and to the support that the Ziegler family gives us to compete at the highest level of the sport."

For the fifth week of competition at the Winter Equestrian Festival, Lamaze will bring out Fine Lady 5, a 13-year-old Hanoverian mare owned by Artisan Farms and Torrey Pines Stable. In the pair's last appearance together, they placed third in the \$1.4 million Rolex Grand Prix at CSI5* Geneva, Switzerland.



Eric Lamaze scored his third consecutive victory in the \$35,000 Ruby et Violette WEF Challenge Cup Feb. 4, this time riding Check Picobello Z for owners Artisan Farms and Torrey Pines Stable. Photo by Starting Gate Communications