

Ireland's Conor Swail claims Caledon Cup over the weekend

By Bill Rea

There was a strong international component over the weekend at the Canadian Show Jumping Tournament at Caledon Equestrian Park in Palgrave.

In keeping with that, an Irishman ended up taking home the Caledon Cup.

Conor Swail, who hails from the Belfast area, took both phases of the \$35,000 CSI2* RAM Equestrian event to claim the hardware. He was riding Lansdowne, a 10-year-old chestnut Dutch stallion of Guidam, belonging to Sue Grange and her daughter Arial of Cheltenham.

The pair did a good job both days, turing in clear rounds in the first part of the competition, and then putting the hammer down in the jump offs, running clear both days and in blistering times too.

The weather was rainy and miserable for Saturday's competition, but things still went ahead, with 22 entries in the class. There were 10 horse-rider combinations to make it to Saturday's jump off, including Swail aboard his other mount, Game Ready, also belonging to the Granges. There was almost an 11th. Ljubov Kochetova of Russia guided her mount Wilford 2 over all the jumps, but she took a fraction of a second too long to do it, picking up a single time fault.

Clear rounds were a little harder to come by in the jump off. Kochetova, riding her second entry, the 13-year-old Danish Warmblood gelding Aslan, was the first to produce a clear round, setting the time to beat at 39.64 seconds.

But Swail, who was the second last to go, knocked almost four seconds off that pace. The final competitor with a chance to catch him was 10-time Olympian Ian Millar on Star Power, but they were about a second and a half off the pace.

Swail and Lansdowne have already proven they're an effective combination, turning in impressive performances earlier this month in Spruce Meadows.

'I'm very, very pleased to be here,' Swail declared after Saturday's performance.

'It's a great facility you have here,' he added.

'The conditions were a little testing, there was an awful lot of rain, but the footing was quite good,' he observed. 'The jump-off was tricky enough; it was a test of a jump-off. I thought the course designer did a great job.'

The real star of the show, however, was Lansdowne.

'When you give him the opportunity to do the right things, he doesn't let you down,' said Swail, noting that the stallion is very laid-back and can often be found lying down in his stall, but always rises to the occasion. 'Today he was careful and fast, and I think he enjoys what he's doing. He's very relaxed, but he gets himself up for the big performances. I'm very fortunate; he's a very careful horse.'

'It's a great relationship that we have,' said Swail of the team at the Grange's Lothlorien Farm. 'It's not just me; it's all the staff and everyone who works very well together. That's where all of the success comes from. I am so appreciative of Sue and Arial and their family for giving me the opportunity to ride all of these top horses.'

'It's a nice way for him to finish off the year,' he added.

Sunday again saw Swail get both his mounts into the jump off. Kochetova again had the frustration of picking up time faults on Wilford 2.

There were eight entries in the jump off. Swail and Lansdowne went last, with Jordan Macpherson of Toronto (a student of Millar's) setting a time to beat of 36:03 on Piccobello du Val de Geer. But Swail was up to the challenge, shaving almost two seconds of that time to take the title.

He later commented that he wasn't sure, going in, if he would be able to catch Macpherson.

'You've really got to take all the chances, and hope there are no mistakes,' he said.

'My horse was terrific,' he added. 'There were a few turns where a horse with less quality might not have come back with the same result that he did. He's obviously one of the favourites at the show, but it's nice that he's expected to do well and that he doesn't let you down. That's the sign of a top horse.'

Of the conditions, Swail, 41, commented, 'The new footing makes a huge difference, and it even showed in the results. The course was well-built, but the footing was so good that I think the horses jumped well off of it. There were more clears than I thought there would be.'

'Michel Vaillancourt did a great job and was complimented by everyone on his courses,' commented Craig Collins, managing partner with Equestrian Management Group, which operates the facility. 'Yesterday was a supreme test of the new footing with all of the rain, and everyone commented on how good the ground was and how good the footing was. We had riders from Ireland,

Russia, Vanessa Mannix from Calgary, and Quebec was very well-represented. We had competitors from right across the country. And it was great to have Jonathon Millar back with us, qualifying two horses for the jump-off.?

With the final event of the season having come to a conclusion, phase two of construction now begins at the Caledon Equestrian Park in preparation for hosting the 2015 Pan American Games. A new grand prix stadium, spectator pavilion, indoor complex, and new FEI barn are all expected to be complete by spring of 2014.



Chris Sorensen of Caledon guides Wriomf over this jump Saturday. Photos by Bill Rea



Conor Swail acknowledged the crowd as he and Lansdowne went into the ring to receive the Caledon Cup Sunday.



Conor Swail signed this ribbon for Julia Gilman, 14, Brantford, who was representing the Children's Wish Foundation.