

Very successful week in Florida for Eric Lamaze



Eric Lamaze and Houston won the \$35,000 Ruby et Violette WEF Challenge Cup Round III last Thursday at the Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Florida. Photo by Starting Gate Communications

Canada's Eric Lamaze scored his first win of the 2017 competition season, taking victory in the \$35,000 Ruby et Violette WEF Challenge Cup Round III last Thursday at the Winter Equestrian Festival in Wellington, Florida.

He followed that up Saturday night by winning the \$130,000 CSI3* Adequan Grand Prix riding Fine Lady 5, his individual bronze medal partner at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games.

Forty-three of the world's top riders lined out for Saturday night's competition, jumping tracks set by Belgian course designer Luc Musette of Belgium. Seven posted clear rounds to advance to the all-deciding jump-off. The first three competitors had each knocked down a rail when Lamaze entered the International Arena and put the first clear round on the board in a time of 40.26 seconds. Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum, who claimed a bronze medal as part of the German team in Rio, was next to challenge, and appeared to be giving Lamaze a run for his money before stopping the clock in 40.79 seconds riding Comanche 28. The final challenger, Sergio Alvarez Moya of Spain, who is making his Winter Equestrian Festival debut, also looked to be on track to catch Lamaze's time before crossing the timers in 40.80 seconds to place third riding G&C Unicstar d'Laumone.

"Every time I make a plan for her, she just seems to rise to the occasion," said Lamaze of the 14-year-old Hanoverian mare owned by Andy and Carlene Ziegler's Artisan Farms and his Torrey Pines Stable. "She's become a horse you can really rely on, and know that she will be ready when it counts. This was a difficult course, but she's done some very big classes lately. It was hard, but, for her, it was a little bit of an easier class."

Saturday's event marked Fine Lady 5's first competition of the year, having closed out the 2016 season by winning the \$300,000 Rolex Top Ten Final in Geneva, Switzerland.

"I gave her a long rest after the Olympics, and started back and just did Paris and Geneva at the beginning of December," said Lamaze of Fine Lady 5's competition schedule. "I plan on riding her at the Winter Equestrian Festival here since she is already fit from Geneva. She will do quite a bit at the beginning of the circuit, and then we'll give her a rest before returning to Europe."

A total of 80 starters attempted the track set by Musette Thursday with 15 producing clear rounds to qualify for the jump-off. Lamaze found his way to victory over the shortened course, leaving all the rails in place and stopping the clock in 40.55 seconds to push U.S. Olympic team silver medalist Leslie Howard into second with a time of 41.38 riding Gentille van Spieveld.

Lamaze's winning mount Thursday was Houston, a 10-year-old grey Belgian Warmblood stallion owned by Andy and Carlene Ziegler's Artisan Farms.

"Houston is an up and coming horse that is part of the Artisan Farms team of horses," Lamaze said. "He's a horse that really came on strong towards the end of the year last year and did some great things. He's got all the talent in the world. When you have a string of horses that can go fast, like Fine Lady and Rosana du Park, he never truly had a chance to show off last year, but he was getting some great mileage at a lot of competitions. This is his time to step up, and we couldn't be happier with how he's coming along."

Houston is one of several horses that Lamaze will be showing at the international level throughout the 12-week Winter Equestrian Festival. During last year's winter event, Lamaze won a total of four Ruby et Violette WEF Challenge Cup events riding Rosana du Park, Check Picobello Z, and Fine Lady 5. This year, Houston is the first horse to have his name on the list.

‘It’s a horse that we’ve had for about two years,’ said Lamaze, who divides his time between training bases in Florida and Brussels, Belgium. ‘I have been in many jump-offs with him, but I never really asked for speed because I didn’t feel like the timing was right. Now I feel like his time has come, and it’s his time now to learn it.’

‘Every horse develops on its own schedule and in its own time, and it’s really important to have owners who understand the process and are patient,’ added Lamaze, who is currently ranked number eight in the world. ‘The Zieglers are wonderful that way, and really understand the sport. A lot of the time we invest years, and the owners invest time and money, into bringing these horses along, so it’s nice when you finally get there. I plan on using Houston all along on this circuit; I think you’ll see a lot of him.’

Lamaze will continue to compete on the Florida circuit for the duration of the winter season before heading back to his training base in Belgium. Next up for Lamaze and Fine Lady 5 is the CSI3*-W Palm Beach Masters, running from Feb. 2 to 5 in Wellington.