

LONGINES MASTERS

The Riders Masters Cup will pit the Americans against the Europeans in New York

The 'e' in team stands for equestrian

An unusual format on a world stage keeps the intensity level high

BY LISA COWAN

How do you add a new twist to a staid and traditional sport like show jumping? Just add speed and a team battle for international boasting rights.

The Riders Masters Cup, one of the events at the Longines Masters of New York starting this week at Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Uniondale, pits the best American show jumpers against their European rivals in head-to-head matchups.

"The format keeps both teams in the hunt right to the very end of the competition in most scenarios," said McLain Ward, a three-time Olympic medalist and member of the American team.

"That keeps it exciting and keeps the intensity level high," he said, making for great entertainment.

The results do not count toward world rankings, but the riders enjoy the unusual format, said Robert Ridland, the chef d'équipe of the United States team. "And it's really fun."

It's on a world stage, and "your country is on the line, so in that sense, it's important," he said, but "I think it's more about bragging rights."

The Masters are held from Thursday to Sunday and have long included the Longines Grand Prix and the Longines Speed Challenge. About 80 show jumpers will be competing over the four days. The team competition, which was added to the Masters in 2017, is on Saturday, only the second time it's been held in New York. Five of the top riders from the United States will compete against a team from Europe, in a format loosely based on golf's Ryder Cup.

"Everybody knows about the Ryder Cup from golf: It's a battle between Europe and America," said Christophe Ameeuw, founder of the Riders Masters Cup. "Who are the best equestrians today? It's Europe and America."

A random draw before the competition decides the head-to-head matchups for the first round, in which each horse and rider jumps a course of 1.5-meter fences (nearly five feet) that can be as wide as they are high. The faster of the two riders wins that duel, but a rider and horse who knock down a rail or refuse to jump a fence could lose the duel. The teams score 10 points per win for the first round.

The two coaches then determine which European rider will be matched against which American rider for the second and final round. Each fallen rail



SCOOP BY GUY/ICON SPORT

increases a rider's time by three seconds, meaning that round two has a greater emphasis on quickness and agility than round one.

"It brings the speed element to the forefront of the competition," which makes for an exciting experience for the spectators, Ridland said.

The competitors usually use one of their "speed" horses, Ward said. He wants a horse that is "very good against the clock and naturally fast."

Of course, going faster means cutting corners more tightly, angling fences and sometimes leaving a stride out between two fences. All of these moves will give the rider a faster time, but make it more likely that the horse will drop a rail or refuse.

Each matchup in the second round is worth double points, so even if one team loses all five matches in the first round (as the United States did last year), a couple of wins in the second round can even the fight.

The event is built on the idea of speed,

said Harrie Smolders, a Dutch rider.

"You need a fast horse, but one that normally jumps a little bit bigger," he said. "You have to bring one of your best horses."

Last year's battle in New York wasn't decided until the last fence of the last round, when Smolders beat Ward's time, handing Europe the win.

It's exciting when it's decided who wins or loses in the last split second of the competition, Smolders said. The Americans have yet to win the event, but the competition has been close every time.

"All three of the previous Riders Cups have gone down to the last pairing," Ridland said. "We've always had a shot."

Usually, the coach picks 10 potential riders in advance, then narrows the team to the final five competitors. In what he said was a strategic move, Ridland chose to name this year's final American team early: Beezie Madden, Ward, Devin Ryan, Laura Chapot and Lillie Keenan.

"It's not the grand prix, it's not the most important event of the week, but I think the riders let their hair down a little bit and have a little fun with it," Ward said.

Philippe Guerdat, the coach of the European team, said he would name his finalists closer to the competition. As the former coach of the French national show jumping team, Guerdat is familiar with all of the European riders and their horses. "We'll look at how the horses are jumping that week," Guerdat said.

The Masters week at the coliseum will also include music, art, shopping and other performances, including a college riding competition and dog agility.

An equestrian himself, Ameeuw is passionate about increasing the fan base for show jumping. People probably think "it's a little bit boring," he said. But he hopes that spectators, whether or not they love horses, will come to an event and "discover a beautiful, fantastic sport."

He compared the experience to at-

tending Grand Slam tennis tournaments. When you go to the United States Open, even if you're not a big tennis fan, there are many other things to do and enjoy, he said.

But for the die-hard show-jumping disciples, there is no shortage of top competition, culminating with the grand prix on Sunday.

Ward won that class last year riding Clinta, his 12-year-old gray Oldenburg mare. But this year she is recovering from an injury, so he said he hoped to ride Tradition De La Roque, a 12-year-old black Selle Français, owned by Kessler Show Stables.

New York is the third stop in the Longines Masters series after Paris in December and Hong Kong in February. Ward, who lives in Brewster, N.Y., said he liked having the team competition in New York.

"My hope is that it keeps growing in popularity," he said, "and is something that can be a great event for many years to come."

Over the rails

McLain Ward, a three-time Olympic medalist and member of the American team, at last year's Riders Masters Cup in New York. The Europeans won the event.

Jumping through hoops

The logistical challenges of getting from one competition to the next

BY HANNAH WULKAN

A professional show jumper has to navigate a complicated set of obstacles with limited time. That is equally true before the competition starts as the rider, horses and their support staff have to travel to the event and then quickly move to the next one.

A rider often travels around the world nearly every weekend of the year, attending dozens of competitions. The logistical challenges of that are daunting.

There are travel schedules for multiple horses and their support teams to juggle and training to maintain. Grooms come along. The riders themselves do not have much free time as they scramble from one competition to another, popping into a new location midweek and often leaving on a Sunday for the next event.

"It is by no means a 9-to-5 job or one where you can clock out when the day's over," said Adrienne Sternlicht, an American rider who was on the gold medal-winning team at the World Equestrian Games last year. "It's really a lifestyle sport just so far as there's really no such thing as time off."

She and other riders from around the world have come to New York for the Longines Masters starting this weekend at the Nassau Veterans Memorial Coliseum in Uniondale, flying in for less than a week before leaving for the next competition.

Top riders can often compete in about 40 shows per year around the world, each of which are usually held from Wednesday to Sunday. This means the teams are constantly in transit.

"Week in, week out, you pack your bag, go to the airport, travel and stay in a hotel," said Olivier Philippaerts, a Belgian show jumper who will be bringing his horses H&M Cue Channa 42 and Insolente des Dix Bonniers, both gray mares, to the Masters. "I basically live in a hotel. I get only three days home a



DAVID BUCHAN/GETTY IMAGES

week, so I am in a hotel more than I am at home."

Despite that, some riders said that traveling all over the world and getting to compete at the top level made up for the downsides.

"You get tired, and miss your family, but especially when you're young, there is no real negative," said Beat Mändli, a Swiss show jumper who will bring his bay mare Dsarie and his chestnut gelding Galan S to the Masters. "Every day is different, and there is always some new exciting stuff coming up."

Though riders are constantly traveling, a single horse cannot compete that often. So riders keep strings of horses — like a bench of athletes — that they rotate depending on the event. These strings can often range from five to 10 horses, though usually only two or three are taken to each competition.

"Just because the rider is going to 40 competitions a year doesn't mean any one horse is going to 40 a year, not even

remotely close to that," said Robert Ridland, the chef d'équipe of the United States team. "It's a very complicated operation for these riders with all these strings of horses and how to keep them on the road and keep them fresh, rotating the other ones in."

Though it varies based on each horse's needs, according to United States Equestrian Federation data compiled by Ridland, the average international grand prix horse competes in about 43 classes, or about 14 shows, per year. This adds another layer of logistics because the horses fly on separate schedules from the riders. And the horses staying home need to be kept in shape.

Carmen Cremers, who handles the travel for Philippaerts and his three brothers, who are also show jumpers, said it can get hectic.

"I basically organize everything for them, staff-wise, journey-wise, entries, hotels, flights, paperwork, accountancy

stuff," she said. "All of it."

In April alone, Olivier Philippaerts competed at the F.E.I. World Cup Finals in Goteborg, Sweden, and afterward flew home for a layover in Oudsbbergen, Belgium. He then headed to Mexico City for the Longines Global Champions Tour, flew to Miami for the next round of the tour and is now in New York for the Masters.

The horses he rode in Mexico and Miami flew home, while his two horses for New York were shipped to meet him at the show.

We try to plan "as far as possible in advance, but we always keep in mind that last-minute changes can come up," Cremers said.

Such as, if horses have to drop out. They have extras prepared if that happens. "When we apply to a show like New York, where he can take two horses, we make sure that everything is good to go for four horses," she said.

Shipping horses and riding equip-

ment, as well as maintaining the horses' health and fitness, also is a big operation.

"Each rider has to have somebody underneath them that is so adept, who are horse people of the highest caliber, but they also have to be very good at organization," Ridland said.

Those people must work as a tight-knit unit, because they are responsible for the logistics and for the welfare of the horses.

"At any one moment anyone has to be able to pitch in and be knowledgeable about the details and quirks and idiosyncrasies of every animal," Sternlicht said.

In addition to their competition string, riders also have younger horses training to eventually compete.

"It's sort of a game of horse management and trying to peak the horses at the right moment and then always have horses coming up that are developing," Sternlicht said. "There are horses you make short-term plans with and then others that you make longer-term plans with."

The team in place is essential not only for making sure that the riders and horses get where they need to go and are well taken care of, but also to ensure the rider can focus on the competition.

"I'm always telling them less is better," Ridland said. "The more that they can delegate to these incredibly talented people in their operation, the more they can focus as athletes on the competition at hand."

Because show jumping has little margin for error, riders must be able to focus on it completely.

"In our sport, you could, in theory, knock the first jump down and then jump every other jump better than any other horse and rider combination in the class," Ridland said, but "you're still not going to win, because you will still be leaving the arena with four faults and there's no way to erase that."

"That's the pressure that very few other sports have, so the last thing you need is to have your mind a little bit cluttered when you're on the field of play," Ridland added. "Because of all the other logistics that have to go on, you have to be so confident in delegating to people who you can really trust."

Pack it up

Shipping horses and riding equipment, as well as maintaining the horses' health and fitness, is a big operation. Each rider's team has someone who coordinates that.