

The Power of the Puissance

By Molly Sorge

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The puissance is the very essence of show jumping boiled down to one class — how high can your horse jump?

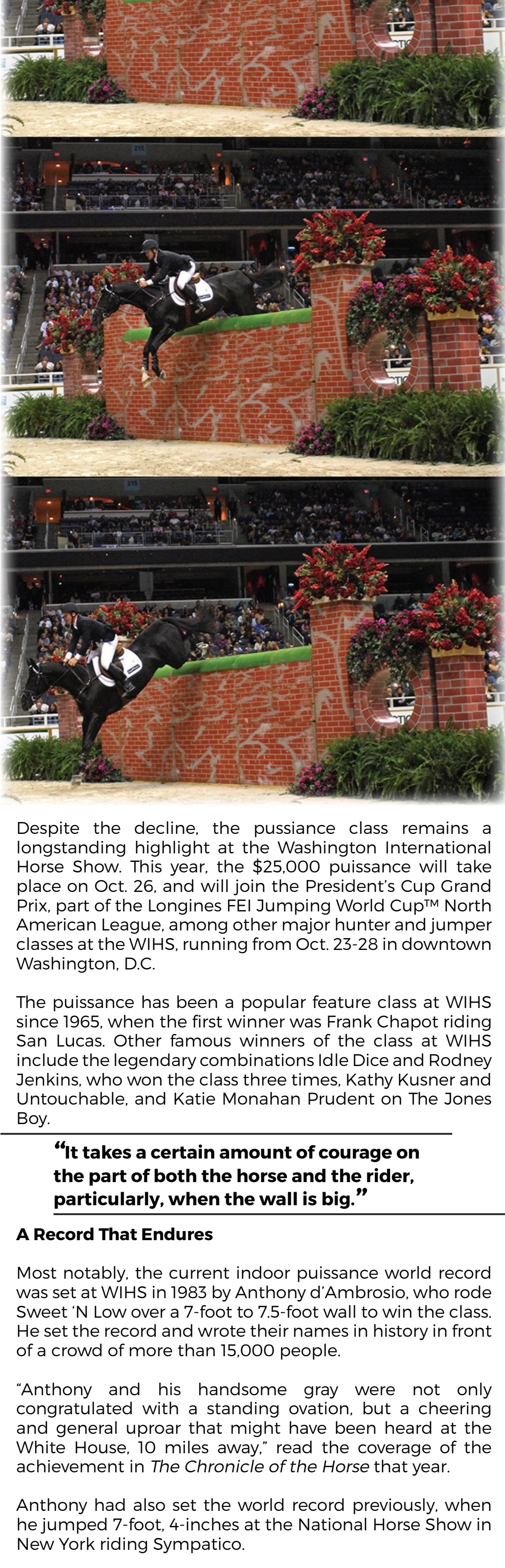
"It's the roots of the sport," explained McLain Ward, two-time Olympic team gold medalist. "In the past, it was often the most important class of the show, especially in the 1950s and '60s.

When the grand prix started to become the premier event in the '70s, and through the '70s and early '80s, the puissance often had as much prize money, if not more than the grand prix."

The puissance class takes place over a maximum of five rounds, with the first round consisting of four-to-six large single obstacles, including the puissance wall, which is traditionally a solid wall built of wooden boxes painted to look like stone or brick. The puissance differs from the high jump, which is an obstacle of angled poles rather than a solid vertical wall.

The puissance wall starts at 4-foot, 6-inches and is raised after each round. The other jumps on the course are also gradually removed as the rounds go on, until there are only two jumps — an oxer and the puissance wall. Riders who jump the wall clean progress to the next round and the horse-and-rider combination clearing the wall at the greatest height wins. In the event that multiple horses have cleared the wall in the fifth round, the riders share first prize, unless they want to continue and challenge the world record.

In recent years, the popularity of the puissance class has faded a bit, as the grand prix class has become the highlight of most show schedules. The evolution of grand prix courses began to feature lighter rails and more technical questions, thus causing riders to stock their stables with horses better suited for the trend.



Despite the decline, the puissance class remains a longstanding highlight at the Washington International Horse Show. This year, the \$25,000 puissance will take place on Oct. 26, and will join the President's Cup Grand Prix, part of the Longines FEI Jumping World Cup™ North American League, among other major hunter and jumper classes at the WIHS, running from Oct. 23-28 in downtown Washington, D.C.

The puissance has been a popular feature class at WIHS since 1965, when the first winner was Frank Chapot riding San Lucas. Other famous combinations of the class at WIHS include the legendary combinations Idle Dice and Rodney Jenkins, who won the class three times, Kathy Kusner and Untouchable, and Katie Monahan Prudent on The Jones Boy.

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A Record That Endures

Most notably, the current indoor puissance world record was set at WIHS in 1983 by Anthony d'Ambrosio, who rode Sweet 'N Low over a 7-foot to 7.5-foot wall to win the class. He set the record and wrote their names in history in front of a crowd of more than 15,000 people.

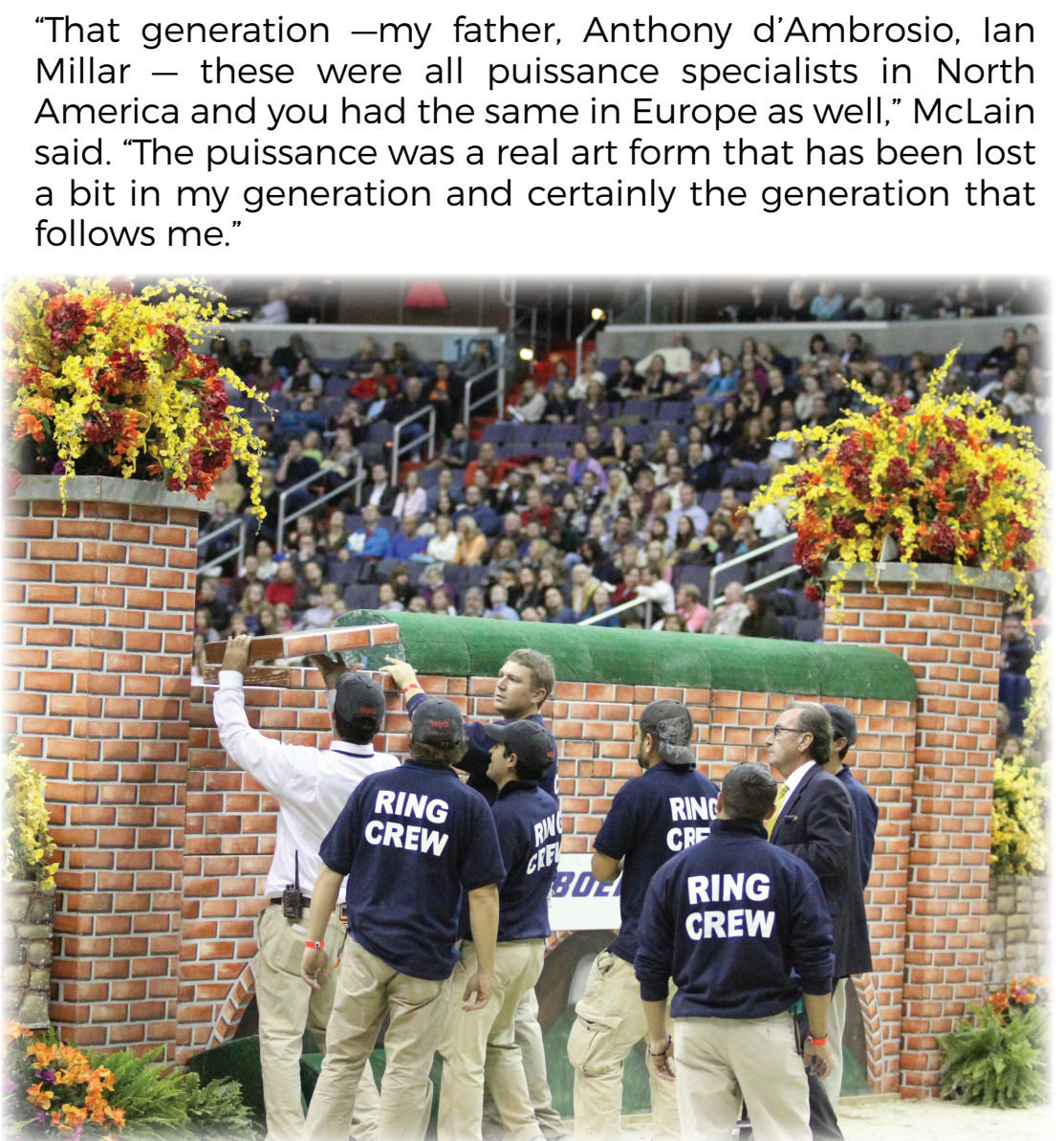
"Anthony and his handsome gray were not only congratulated with a standing ovation, but a cheering and general uproar that might have been heard at the White House, 10 miles away," read the coverage of the achievement in *The Chronicle of the Horse* that year.

Anthony had also set the world record previously, when he jumped 7-foot, 4-inches at the National Horse Show in New York riding Sympatico.

"I'd been doing puissance competitions since I was 17 years old," Anthony said. "I actually won my first puissance as a junior when I was 13. I had a good knack for the puissance. I won probably more than 50 percent of the puissance classes [that] I was in.

"It was a class that, as a very young person, I was watching Frank Chapot and Bill Steinkraus [show in]," he continued. "My dad would always take me in to watch the puissance, and I always liked that class. It's a great crowd favorite. I could relate to it and the excitement of it. I seemed to understand how to ride to the wall, and I could teach a horse how to jump a big wall."

Sweet 'N Low was a 17.1-hand Thoroughbred that had come off the track at age three. He was nine at the time of his WIHS puissance win.



"He really had quite a lot of jump, so we started to do the puissance competition at [WIHS] in 1982," Anthony recalled. "He was very good and he jumped 7-foot, 1-inch to be second that year."

In 2014, Sweet 'N Low's owners, Mrs. and Mrs. Donald G. Tober, donated a trophy in his name to be awarded to the winning horse in the puissance.

A True Test Of Classical Riding

McLain was there watching in 1982 when his father won the class and set the record and was there again in 1983 to watch Anthony break that record. McLain himself has won the WIHS puissance class six times since 2000, retiring and then re-donating the trophy after three consecutive wins in 2000, '01, and '02 riding Achat 6.

"That generation —my father, Anthony d'Ambrosio, Ian Millar — these were all puissance specialists in North America and you had the same in Europe as well," McLain said. "The puissance was a real art form that has been lost a bit in my generation and certainly the generation that follows me."

While the traditional puissance class used to be a fixture of U.S. shows, WIHS is now the only show in the country to offer it.

"I think the sport as a whole, and the style of horses that we need now to compete at grand prix level, has moved away from those big, power jumpers to a lighter, more delicate horse with more finesse, so it doesn't suit them as much," said McLain.

"It takes a certain amount of courage on the part of both the horse and the rider, particularly, when the wall is big," McLain continued. "What the rider has to understand is that it's not necessarily speed that gets you over the wall, but it's having the horse's hind end really engaged. It's not what you might assume is the best way to jump a wall, which is to gallop at it as fast as you can. The reality is that you have to go back to classical roots of riding — the horse's hind end has to be as engaged as possible."

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It's still an incredibly entertaining and competitive class when done well, McLain stressed.

"It's competitions like that that have brought in huge spectator attendance and made generations of fans. We've lost a little bit of the character of the sport and the puissance and other special classes like that were part of it," he said.