

King Edward Extends His Reign At Longines FEI Jumping World Cup Final

Story And Photos By **KIMBERLY LOUSHIN**

Long before winning his Olympic and World Championship medals, Henrik von Eckermann dreamed of the Longines FEI Jumping World Cup Final. As a child, he made regular trips to the Gothenburg Horse Show (Sweden) to watch the World Cup. The Scandinavium was the venue for the first FEI Jumping World Cup Final in 1979 and has hosted the final 15 times since its inception.

Though he'd contested the championship five times prior to the 2023 edition, held April 4-8 in Omaha, Nebraska, his best finish was third twice with Toveks Mary Lou, in 2017 and 2018. So on the evening of April 8, as he stood in the center of the podium and FEI President Ingmar de Vos handed him the

coveted trophy, the Swede took a moment to examine the names engraved along the bottom.

"It's always been there as a big, big goal and a dream for me to be able to have my name on that trophy," he said. "So for me it's very special.

"After Geneva [where he won the Rolex IJC Top 10 Final in December], we had this as a goal, and we said, 'I want to go to the World Cup Final, and I want to try to win it,'" he continued. "Even if it's a fantastic horse, we all know it's horses, and it's very easy that it doesn't go the way [you want], so it makes it even more special now that we had the goal, and we made it."

Henrik von Eckermann and King Edward continued their dominance of major show jumping championships by winning the Longines FEI Jumping World Cup Final.



Dutch rider Harrie Smolders finished second in the Longines FEI Jumping World Cup Final with Monaco N.O.P.



His victory came on the back of King Edward, a 13-year-old Belgian Warmblood (Edward 28—Koningin De Lauzelle, Feo). The gelding jumped up to 1.40 meters with a Belgian amateur rider before Dufour Stables AG purchased him for von Eckermann's wife, Swiss show jumper Janika Sprunger. Von Eckermann took up the reins when Sprunger was pregnant with their son Noah in 2020. The pair went on to team gold and individual fourth at the 2021 Tokyo Olympics and double gold at last year's Agria FEI Jumping World Championships (Denmark), beginning von Eckermann's eight-month reign at the top of the Longines FEI World Rankings.

"He's done so many great things, and of course the more great things you do, the more expectation you have, and we all know how quickly it goes even with a great horse like this," said von Eckermann.

Earlier this season in Gothenburg, King Edward had two down in the World Cup qualifier. Not wanting to head to Omaha off of that, von Eckermann made a detour to 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands, where they were third in the grand prix, giving them the perfect prep to the World Cup Final.

With wins in three major championships in the last three years, von Eckermann has developed a system for King Edward, which includes longeing instead of riding in the morning.

"Two hours before, I longe him a bit and make him warm in his body just to try to keep his energy up, to keep him fresh and happy," he said. "I know him very well, and I trust him. That makes also the difference between a really good horse and a superstar like he is. You know he can perform, and he's just getting better and better."

"The last round was the best round he did, and he was the

same in the World Championship," he continued. "And of course, as a rider, when you sit on the horse like that, and you have this feeling that the horse is just growing into it, it gives you self-confidence, and it's an amazing feeling."

Though unassuming on the ground, King Edward is a formidable adversary in the ring.

"He's like a dog at home, you know," said von Eckermann.

"He's so easy and so relaxed. He's a very small horse, but when he comes in the ring it feels like he's growing 5 centimeters more, and that makes the difference. Some horses they come in, and they get a bit shy, but with him you can feel how—it's like starting an engine. It's a fantastic, special feeling."

On Day 1, the pair was last to go, and they took control of the leaderboard with a fast clear. While a single rail kept them out of the jump-off on Day 2, they sat third overall and were a single fault behind the leaders.

"Of course I was not happy when I came out [on Day 2], but then how the jump-off went, and with only one point different, I saw it as quite positive," he said. "I thought, OK, he jumped one round less. And also when I came out today, he felt better than all the other days. He was fresh, and he was really jumping good."

While they had one rail in Round A on the final day—only Irish rider Denis Lynch on Brooklyn Heights went double clear over that track, set by designer Bernardo Costa Cabral—a clear round over the second course helped von Eckermann clinch the title.

"I think I'm top of my career," he said. "It feels like it can only go one way, and that's down, the wrong way. So I really try to hold on to the moments, and actually every day I'm thankful for what I have."

Dutch rider Harrie Smolders moved up from a tie for seventh to finish second with Monaco N.O.P. While he was hungry for a win, he had utmost respect for the champion chestnut.

"King Edward is a horse dominating our sport, but then still to win there's also different pressure that you need to handle," he said. "I would have loved to go in a jump-off because Monaco was—as people saw this morning in the vet check—still feeling amazing. His energy level and his focus, this was probably the day that I could compete against King Edward, but I don't need to be ashamed to be second and have such a champion in front of us."

HOMETOWN HERO

As she sat at the table for the press conference on Day 1, as the top-ranked U.S. rider, Hunter Holloway said her goal was to be near the top five heading into the final day to give herself the best shot to be in contention to stand on the podium on Saturday. That proved prophetic as the 25-year-old from Topeka, Kansas, found herself in third at the end of the weekend with Pepita Con Spita.

"I think I've always had pretty big goals, and this has always been a very big goal of mine, and to be sitting with riders such as this is obviously a great honor," she said. "Very excited to be here and thrilled, and I think my horse performed great all week. The relationship with her has always been great. It's only getting stronger and building, and I kind of feel like we're just getting started, so I'm very excited for the future with her."

Holloway found the 12-year-old Westphalian mare (DSP Con Spirit—Pamina, Come On) owned by Hays Investment Corp. four years ago. The mare had showed in young horse classes with German Toni Hassmann and was being campaigned by Belgian rider Melanie Gelin when Holloway spotted her.

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—HENRIK VON ECKERMANN

"I've always loved mares," she said. "I've always kind of had an affinity for them, and some of my best horses have been mares, so that alone drew me to her, and she's a hot mare on top of that, so it's one of my favorite types of rides. She has her moments, her spicy mare moments, but I love her even more for them most of the time. It's what makes her so strong-willed in the arena. That same fight that she has is what makes her so special at the same time."

Longines FEI Jumping World Cup Final Omaha, Neb.—April 4-8				
Horse/Rider/Nation	Converted To Faults After First And Second Legs	Third Leg Round A	Third Leg Round B	Total
1. King Edward/Henrik von Eckermann/SWE	1	4	0	5
2. Monaco N.O.P./Harrie Smolders/NED	5	0	4	9
3. Pepita Con Spita/Hunter Holloway/USA	3	8	0	11
4. Vitiki/Yuri Mansur/BRA	3	8	0	11
5. Darc De Lux/Andreas Schou/DEN	0	12	0	12
6. Vancouver De Lanlore/Pius Schwizer/SUI	0	4	8	12
7. Brooklyn Heights/Denis Lynch/IRL	14	0	0	14
8. United Touch S/Richard Vogel/GER	2	12	1	15
9. Balou Du Reventon/Harry Charles/GBR	5	4	8	17
10. Leone Jei/Martin Fuchs/SUI	13	0	4	17

Also competed: 11. Hello Jefferson/S. Brash/GBR, 18; 12. Visconti Du Telman/K. Staut/FRA, 18; 13. Eddie Blue/D. Ryan/USA, 19; 14. Cicci B.JN/W. Hellström/SWE, 19; 15. Messi Van't Ruytershof/J. Meyer-Zimmermann/GER, 20; 16. Equine America Papa Roach/V. Gulliksen/NOR, 22; 17. Gakhir/E. Ballard/CAN, 24; 18. Donatello D'Auge/J. Epailard/FRA, 25; 19. Ladriano Z/D. Bluman/ISR, 27; 20. Cornet's Cambridge/N. Dello Joia/USA, 30.

Did not qualify for Third Leg, Round B: 21T. Priam Du Roset/M. Ehning/GER; 21T. Babalou HD/A. Alrajhi/KSA; 23T. Gamin Van't Naastveldhof/E. Schmitz/SUI; 23T. Callas/M. Ward/USA; 25. Linkolns/A. Petrovas/LTU; 26T. Blues D'Aveline CH/G. Nieberg/GER; 26T. Legacy/D. Coyle/IRL; 28. Prescott/A. Vale/USA; 29. Lancelotta/N. Tuyakbaev/UZB; 30. Cassina Dior/P. Steiner/NZL.

Did not advance to Third Leg, Round A: Kardenta Van't Meerhof/E. Broz/USA; Vivaldi Du Theil/A. Cunniffe/USA; Cool Quarz/D. Janciauskas/LTU; Acota M/N. Dean/USA; Cooper/S. Berg/USA; Scuderia 1918 Tobago Z/D. Deusser/GER; Fiumicino Van De Kalevalle/J. Vrieling/NED; Oaks Cassanova/S. Overton/AUS; Casper AJ/A. Al Nuami/UAE; Baloucenta/M. Al Karbi/UAE.

Time in Third Leg, Round B, was used to break ties.

HORSE SHOWS



Hunter Holloway was the highest-placed U.S. rider in the Longines FEI Jumping World Cup Final. She finished third with Pepita Con Spita.

While Holloway knew “Pepita” would be a top grand prix horse, she admitted she didn’t have 1.60-meter courses or championships in mind when she bought her.

“I don’t think in any horse you ever know,” she said. “You know there’s kind of a defining moment with every horse in their career where you’re like, OK, they’re the real deal; they can do it. You know it. And that mare, she keeps giving more. Every time she steps in the ring she gives her all, and there’s never been a time where she’s felt tapped out or felt any sort of, ‘Oh, I can’t do this.’ She just keeps giving you an extra level of power and scope with each height and with each new territory, so to speak.”

The pair made their championship debut last year at the Longines FEI Jumping World Cup Final in Leipzig, Germany, where they were 16th. Almost immediately Holloway started making plans for Omaha, armed with more knowledge on how to peak for a championship. She kept the mare’s show schedule light, hoping to keep her physically fresh.

“The focus really for her is keep her mentally happy, obviously—happy horse, happy life—physically very fit, put a huge focus on fitness, and then keeping her life interesting, and we worked on strengthening her canter,” she said. “Really I think

I jumped her three times total, schooling-wise, in preparation for World Cup Finals, over the course of multiple weeks obviously, and the schools were quite simple. We trotted big jumps. That’s what we did. It’s that simple for her. The focus was more on the flatwork and building her up and her fitness.”

Only two other U.S. pairs, Devin Ryan on Eddie Blue and Nick Dello Joio on Cornet’s Cambridge, moved onto the final round, and they finished 13th and 20th, respectively. McLain Ward, who won the 2017 Final in Omaha, was 11th with Callas on the first day but had three down and a time fault on the second day to fall out of contention. They finished 23rd overall. Aaron Vale, competing in his second final, finished 28th on Prescott. The remaining U.S. riders—Elisa Broz (Kardenta Van’t Meerhof), Ailish Cunniffe (Vivaldi Du Theil), Natalie Dean (Acota M) and Simonne Berg (Cooper)—were all first timers and failed to qualify for the final day. 🐾