

Hat Trick for John French and Babylon in \$25,000 WCHR Professional Challenge

It was a three-peat victory for John French and Babylon, owned by Marnell Sport Horses, in the \$25,000 <u>World Championship Hunter Rider (WCHR)</u> Professional Challenge, sponsored by The Gochman Family, during the 30th anniversary of the Capital Challenge Horse Show. The class was the highlight of the schedule on Wednesday, October 4, at Prince George's Equestrian Center in Upper Marlboro, MD. Rounding out the evening's competition, Halie Robinson of Santa Barbara, CA, and Leisure, owned by Stable Assets, triumphed in the \$10,000 WCHR Developing Pro Challenge, sponsored by John R. Ingram Fund.

Earlier in the day, Nick Haness and On Call, owned by Brad Wolf, won the \$25,000 KASK/Vogel Green Hunter 3' and 3'3" North American Championship, sponsored by the Wheeler family.

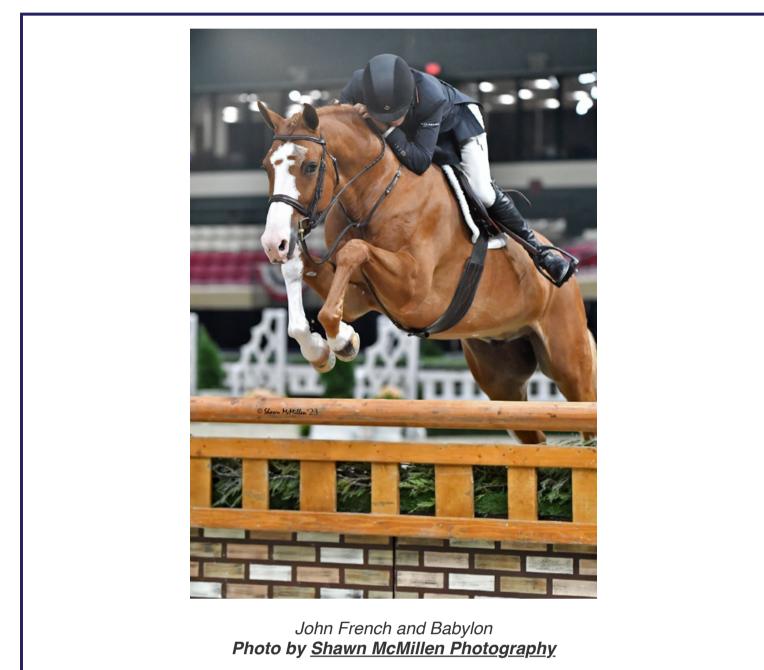


Photo by <u>Shawn McMillen Photography</u>

Riders qualified for the \$25,000 WCHR Professional Challenge by finishing in the top four in professional hunter classes at the show or ranking in the top 10 nationally. The class consisted of a first round for all 24 competitors and a second round for the top 12 horse-and-rider combinations.

Judging the class was three panels of two judges, such that each panel provided a score, and the average of those three marks yielded the rider's overall total. Peg Seals and Chris Wynne made up the first panel, while Brian Lenehan and Eric Dirks sat on the second, and Mark Jungherr and Mary Eufemia represented the third.

Entering The Show Place Arena in the middle of the order, all eyes were on the 2021 and 2022 WCHR Professional Challenge winners, French and Babylon. After landing from the final oxer in front of the in gate, cheers erupted from the crowd.



"I was a little nervous in the warm-up area because he felt a little fresh today, but I knew when he went in there that it's his job," recalled French who has brought Babylon along since he was a four-year-old. "I don't know if it's because I started him from the beginning when he was really green, but he's my kind of ride. I wake him up a little bit, but then try to be really soft with no pressure in front of the jump and let him use his head and neck. Because I've had him for so long and he is my kind of ride, once I'm on him and in the ring, I'm like, 'We've got this."

With an average score of 93.33 in round one, French and the eight-year-old Oldenburg gelding by Crumbie went straight to the top of the leaderboard. Last to return in round two, silence filled the arena as spectators waited with palpable anticipation for each jumping effort. Once again, the duo did not disappoint, delivering an impressive 94.33 for a two-round total of 187.66.

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With the high score in both rounds of the \$10,000 WCHR Developing Pro Challenge, sponsored by John R. Ingram Fund, Halie Robinson led the victory gallop aboard Leisure, an eight-year-old Hanoverian mare by Comte owned by Stable Assets LLC. Their 180.32 total came from a first-round score of 89.66 and 90.66 in the second round.

Despite their short relationship together from the beginning of 2023, Robinson and Leisure have made the most of their show year together.



Halie Robinson and Leisure Photo by <u>Shawn McMillen Photography</u>

"I flew across the country in the middle of the night to try her, and we have never looked back since then. She is the most incredible little horse in the world. She's only in her Green Hunter 3'3" year right now. I think she was one of the only horses out there that was still doing that. She's never been anything but absolutely spectacular. This is really just our fourth or fifth show with her this summer, and she has improved and impressed us every single time."

Robinson was unsure what to expect of the young mare with the bigger atmosphere of a night class. "She was a professional out there, so she didn't really need too much. I just tried to give her the best performance I could so she could have a special night," said Robinson.



Abel Davila, Stephanie Engle, Martha Ingram, Rachel Kennedy, Whitney Allen, Jennifer Hinman, and Chris Sorensen joined Halie Robinson and Leisure in the winner's presentation. **Photo by <u>Shawn McMillen Photography</u>**

This was Robinson's third time in the WCHR Developing Pro Challenge, having finished seventh in 2022 and 11th in 2021. Capital Challenge is Robinson's favorite horse show of the year, so to win this prestigious class stood out in her professional career.

"Tonight was finally the night so I was really happy," admitted Robinson, who also won the 2017 USEF Show Jumping Talent Search Finals – West at the age of 21. "It's also so great to win on a horse that we have in the barn and have gotten to know over the past couple of months. She is just as spectacular as we could have ever hoped, so hopefully we get to keep working with her. I think she is really a once-in-a-lifetime horse."

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Earlier in the day, 32 horse-and-rider combinations entered The Show Place Arena for the \$25,000 <u>KASK/Vogel</u> Green Hunter 3' and 3'3" North American Championship, sponsored by the Wheeler family. With an impressive overall score of 179.66, Nick Haness and Brad Wolf's On Call were victorious. Samantha Schaefer of Westminster, MD, and Cordial, a nine-year-old Westphalian gelding by Cachassini, owned by Carol Stillwell, finished in second place with a total score of 178.32. While Holly Orlando of Wellington, FL, and Macallan, an eight-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding by Typhoon S, owned by Privet Farm LLC, finished on the same total score, their lower second round score saw them finish in third.

The class was overseen by three panels, each with two judges. Chris Wynne and Eric Dirks sat on the first panel, while Brian Lenehan and Mary Eufemia made up the second, and Peg Seals and Mark Jungherr were the third. Each panel awarded a score with the average representing the rider's overall mark. Horses competing at either the 3' or the 3'3" heights were scored equally, and the top 12 returned for the second round.



Photo by Shawn McMillen Photography

Haness guided "Howard" to an impressive first-round score of 90.33 and followed that up with an equally stunning second-round trip, earning an 89.33.

"Howard is a really, really funny horse," said Haness of the eight-year-old Swedish Warmblood gelding by Untouchable. "He's got a big, big personality. He is very capable of jumping beautiful jumps, and he's got a huge, round, scopey, athletic way of going. We have high hopes for his future as well. He's very seasoned at this point, so he's familiar with the pressure this class brings. He's very comfortable indoors, and I think his big jump and big open stride really proved to be what the judges were looking for today."

Haness was actually unaware he was slated to compete with Howard in the Championship class until he saw the start list in the morning. Though Haness knew they had qualified, he expected Howard to be focused on competing with Wolf in the 3'3" Amateur Owner Hunter 36 & Over division. After a positive outing with his owner in the Outdoor Arena, Howard was ready to take on The Show Place Arena with Haness in the irons.

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Learn about John French following his wir in the \$25,000 WCHR Professional Challenge!

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Listen to Halie Robinson talk about her win in the \$10,000 WCHR Developing Pro Challenge!









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Photos by <u>Shawn McMillen Photography</u>





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About the Capital Challenge Horse Show

The Capital Challenge Horse Show, an official USEF Heritage Competition, has a distinct and unique focus on preeminent hunter and equitation competition. The 2023 edition of

the Capital Challenge Horse Show will take place from September 28-October 8. The 11 days of competition will include prestigious equitation events, jumper divisions, the World Championship Hunter Rider (WCHR) Finals, the \$25,000 3' and 3'3" Green Hunter North American Championships, and more, with many of the country's best horses and riders competing in junior, amateur, and professional divisions.

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