

Nora Batchelder's Faro SQF Is Lord of the Dance

2024 Finals feature fabulous freestyles and plenty of high scores

BY ALICE COLLINS FOR JUMP MEDIA/

USDRESSAGE FINALS

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DANCING STARS: Nora Batchelder and Faro SQF

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ora Batchelder led from the front in the Open Grand Prix Free-style—the show’s biggest class—at the 2024 US Dressage Finals

presented by Adequan®, held November 7-10 at the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington. Riding her “heart horse,” the Fidertanz gelding Faro SQF, she notched up 74.208% from first draw, and nobody could catch her.

The reserve champion’s sash went to Kristin Wasemiller-Knutson and Vashti with 73.183%. Heather McCarthy finished third with 71.442% on Au Revoir.

Batchelder, who is from Florida, where Faro was bred, said: “His test had a lot of energy, and for a sixteen-year-old it feels good that he’s still so into it. It’s a crazy-hard pattern, and I was nervous; I’m always nervous. He was so awake, alive, and happy. This might actually be our last show together, I’m not sure. I have a lot of young ones coming up, and I don’t know if we have anything left to prove; he’s done so much for me.”

Their test was a technically challenging floor plan that featured two-time changes on a circle blending seamlessly into one-times, and included a piaffe pirouette.

The Batchelder name appeared atop another leader board, as well, when Nora’s sister Emma, a nurse anesthetist, captured the First Level Adult Amateur championship title with a score of 72.963% on the five-year-old Eminem.

“He feels like an old pro,” Emma Batchelder said of the Escolar son. “He’s five going on fifteen. Now he’s filling out, too; he’s getting a lot more power and more control of the power.”

Aiken Brings the Special Sauce

Three riders from the well-known “horse country” South Carolina city each took home the top prize in their class. Despite riding with a groin injury, Jeremy Steinberg produced an outstanding performance when it mattered to win the First Level Open Championship on Henry with 74.583%.

Steinberg bought Henry (by For Final) on the strength of “his cute face” and has fallen in love with him since importing him as a two-year-old from the Netherlands.

“The expectations were pretty low because I haven’t ridden the last two weeks,” Steinberg admitted afterward. “It was such a rough couple of weeks building up to Finals that I couldn’t be happier with what he did today.”

Steinberg’s friend and student Allison Cyprus claimed the First Level Open reserve championship on

another five-year-old, her own self-described “goofball” Oceana ISF. In the Second Level Open championship class the placings were reversed, with Cyprus taking top honors over Steinberg on 72.103%.

“She was a trouper in the rain,” said Cyprus, who bought the Sir Sinclair mare as a two-year-old from Pennsylvania-based breeder Iron Spring Farm and started her herself. “This is her first big championships, and I was super excited with how she handled the environment.”

Sixteen-year-old USDF bronze medalist Eila Fisk, also from Aiken, collected her own championship cooler to take home. In her first year of recognized competition, she led the 21-entry Third Level Junior/Young Rider class with 66.958% on the 12-year-old Oldenburg gelding Quaresma. Fisk trains with Laura Abner, who is based at Zia Equestrian, owned by Fisk’s mother, Gina Fisk.

“He gave me a magical feeling when I got on, and his trot is so elastic,” said Fisk, who is a dual-enrolled freshman at the University of South Carolina Aiken, although technically she’s still a high-school junior. “He’s consistent and amiable, and living life to the fullest.”

Double Delight

Four riders doubled up at Finals, topping two classes apiece. Adult-amateur competitor Phyllis Sumner rode her 10-year-old “worker bee” and Finals debutante Jonanta M to both the Intermediate I AA Championship (68.676%) and the I-I AA Freestyle (71.050%). She used music made by her brother, the Broadway producer Rob Evan, from his show *Rocktopia*, which featured Vivaldi and Led Zeppelin. When Sumner bought Jonanta two years ago in Holland, the Negro x Gribaldi mare had never competed.

“This was a lot from an atmosphere perspective, but ‘Moxie’ did fantastically,” said Sumner, a lawyer who trains at Atlanta Dressage with Roel Theunissen. “She’s very powerful and can be intense and hot because she’s an overachiever, but never ugly or disobedient.” She called riding “my physical and mental therapy.”

Brittany Burson and Patricia Joy’s five-year-old Spielberg gelding Opportunity Knocks were unstoppable in the Training Level Open Championship and the First Level Open Freestyle, heading up both with scores of over 74%.

“I’m floored by these wins, as they were such competitive classes,” said Burson, who divides her time between Illinois, where she trains with Heather McCarthy; and Wellington, Florida, where she rides with Scott Hassler.



OPEN GRAND PRIX CHAMPION: Ali Potasky and Inxs

“He’s a super-fun horse to ride, and he handled the electric atmosphere really well.”

Kate Fleming-Kuhn of StarWest Dressage in New Berlin, Illinois, doubled up at small tour with her on-form Franzsis HSR, an eight-year-old US-bred gelding by Franziskus. They secured the Prix St. Georges Open title with 70.931% and the Intermediate I Open championship with 72.500%.

“We’ve been working to continue to increase his degree of engagement, and it came together,” said Fleming-Kuhn, who bought Franzsis as a foal from his breeder, Hidden Springs Ranch in California. “The dream is always to make it to big tour, and he has the stuff for that, no doubt.”

Adult-amateur rider Madison Rezaei and her own 13-year-old Polish-bred Maximus led both the Grand Prix AA and the GP AA Freestyle with 66.920% and 70.033% in only their second season together.

“He’s got so much stronger and more confident, and we’ve built a nice partnership,” said Rezaei, who is on sabbatical from her job as a strategy executive. “This is the sweetest horse, with so much try. The nice thing about Grand Prix is that you’re never really done, and there are always things to make better.”

The Mason Magic Returns

The Heather Mason effect is always evident at Finals, and 2024 was no different. The New Jersey-based dressage pro etched her name at the top of the leader board in the Fourth Level Open Freestyle, riding her own Manuskript SCF to 72.842%.

“He has a lot of character and a mind of his own—he’s by Jazz, which says it all!—but he likes to show off,” Mason said of the seven-year-old Dutch gelding, bred by Sporting Chance Farm in Pennsylvania. “He knows everything in the Grand Prix apart from the ones, but I won’t do

it with him until he’s nine or ten; there’s no point in pushing it.”

(Manuskript SCF was also the 2024 Adequan®/USDF Dressage Horse of the Year at both Prix St. Georges and Intermediate I; read more about him on page 80.)

Many other riders credited Mason for their good results, not least Rezaei as well as fellow champions Alexandra Krossen and Katrina Heilbronner. Krossen snagged the Fourth Level AA Freestyle Championship with 70.083% on Mason’s homebred 12-year-old, Nicene, in the mare’s last test at the level.

“Nicene went to the best of her ability today,” said Krossen, who works full-time at a pharmaceutical company and rides in the evenings. “It’s a nice one to go out on.”

Heilbronner rode her own five-year-old Franklin mare, Odanse GS, to top honors in the Training Level AA Championship with 72.933%. She works as a private chef and

mainly trains with Jannike Gray, with additional help from Mason. This was the rider's first Finals.

Of Odanse GS, Heilbronner said: "I bought her sight unseen from Holland with maybe ten rides under saddle, and she's really special. I've never ridden a horse like her before. I've always had big horses and big movers, and now I have this cute little thing with a lot of movement who tries so hard."

Team Chumley Takes Two

Lauren Chumley and Leelo Dallas were the final combination in the Intermediate I Open Freestyle, and their fun routine clinched the title with 72.100%.

"This one really counted, and the freestyle is my jam. I thought, 'We can get this,'" said the New Jersey-based trainer, who has owned the 16-hand eight-year-old mare by Gaspard de la Nuit since she was a foal and who trains with Hilltop Farm's Michael Bragdell. "We've been schooling a lot of Grand Prix, so this is hopefully our last show at small tour. I hope to do Developing Grand Prix next year; she has all the pieces for it."

Chumley's student Taiwan Parrish spearheaded the youth contingent at Finals, capturing the inaugural Intermediate I Junior/Young Rider championship class with 65.980% riding Chumley's admittedly complicated 19-year-old Sandro Hit gelding, Saracchi.

"A lot of the things we've been working on with Lauren at home finally clicked," said Parrish, 19. "The season's been hard because 'Odie' was out with an injury for the first three months of the year, and I was really scared that he wouldn't come back. He's not an easy horse, but he consistently comes out and fights for me. He's the best."

Tyra Vernon's Influence Praised

Two riders credited the Ocala, Florida,-based rider Tyra Vernon for helping bring them to winning ways. Dancing to powerful war-horse-themed music, Brie Seltser and her gift horse, the six-year-old Friesian Grietinus Fan Hoptille, strutted their way to 70.491% in the Second Level Open Freestyle championship.

"This horse was supposed to be a carriage horse, but it wasn't his thing," said Seltser. "He was given to me, and he's been a blessing in my life. I lost my other Friesian, who was doing I-I, and 'Friezy' stepped in—and now look where we are. He's done so much for my heart, and I've learned so much. What a gift."

Vernon's other pupil Bailey Armbrecht topped the Second Level Jr/YR championship class by a hair's breadth. She finished on 66.190% riding Night'n Dale (by Everdale), just 0.07 percentage points ahead of the reserve.

"This is my first time winning anything like this," said Armbrecht, 14, who also trains with her mom, Jennifer Albrecht, spending summers in Colorado and winters in Ocala. "She's only six, so we're just getting started. It's really exciting for the future. We're growing up together, and that's really cool."

Two Weser-Ems Bring Their A-Game

Two diminutive horses got the nod from the judges at Finals. Susan McLean was second to go of 23 starters in the Fourth Level AA championship class. Her score of 69.815% on Bob Marlin, a 15.2-hand Weser-Ems by Bogiboy, could not be caught.

"I was in shock and I started cry-

FINALS SALUTE LONGTIME VOLUNTEERS

At the 2024 US Dressage Finals presented by Adequan®, four volunteers were recognized for having served for 10 years. The USDF and the Finals organizers express their deepest gratitude for the tireless efforts of Marie Keel, Charma Fargo, Rhonda Boles, and Robyn Armer. We thank you for going above and beyond to make the Finals a success!



VOLUNTEERS EXTRAORDINAIRE: 10-year US Dressage Finals volunteers Marie Keel, Charma Fargo, Rhonda Boles, and Robyn Armer

ing," said McLean, who traveled 12 hours from her home near Orlando, Florida, and who was riding the horse originally purchased from Germany for her daughter three years ago. "He wound up being a little too complicated for her, so I started riding him. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would get to do this."

McLean helps run the family business, the juice company Uncle Matt's Organic, and trains with Katie Freeman.

Kathy Mathers' 11-year-old 14-hand Weser-Ems mare, Ryann (by Ridley), spent her first eight years in a field, but Ryann rocked the arena under Susan Morrison in the First Level AA Freestyle, leading with 70.759%.

"Ryann is spicy and excitable and an awesome pony," said Morrison, a recently retired math teacher of 34 years who trains with Donna Gatchell in Virginia. "This is a fun hobby."

2024 FINALS FEATURE POPULAR REGIONS CUP

The winner of the LeMieux/US Dressage Finals Regions Cup perpetual plaque was USDF Region 3, whose team of riders picked up the bragging rights with an average score of 69.026%.



TOP TEAM: Region 3's Lark Heckman (second from right) with USDF's Stephan Hienzsch, Heather Petersen, Lisa Gorretta, and George Williams

Champion: Region 3 (69.026%)

Amber Gipp/San Sebastián, 71.800%
Sarah Hurst/Final Prince HAF, 68.532%
Lark Heckman/Franzissimo, 73.467%
Phyllis Sumner/Soprano 9, 62.304%

Reserve champion: Region 2
(68.848%)

Third place: Region 1 (68.708%).

Local Hero

Cheers rang out in the Alltech Arena as Ali Potasky and the 11-year-old gelding Inxs (Everdale x Rousseau),

whom she co-owns with her boss, Kathy Priest, nailed their final halt in the Grand Prix Open championship, sealing the win with 72.391%. Potasky is based near the Kentucky Horse Park in Versailles, Kentucky, so she had a large group of fans for the horse's debut at Finals.

"He's unbelievably reliable in any kind of ring, which is funny because he's super-reactive to some things, but I can trust him to not get over-faced," said Potasky, who was last to go in the class. "He's the first horse I've really ridden at Grand Prix. I've trained the movements, but putting it all together is a different monster. It was exciting to be able to make it all happen. He's quirky but a hundred percent honest and loving."

Emotions Running High

James Koford's delight at winning the Third Level Open Championship with 72.375% on his friend Emily Brollier's six-year-old Secret Royal 3 (Secret x Rubin Royal) was palpable. Brollier had a bad fall in the spring of 2024 that resulted in an emergency craniotomy, two fractured ver-

US DRESSAGE FINALS BY THE NUMBERS

The 2024 US Dressage Finals presented by Adequan® included:

- Riders from 37 states
- Equines representing 44 breeds
- A total of 37 titles awarded
- 38 championship coolers distributed (it was a dead heat in the inaugural running of the Prix St. Georges Junior/Young Rider championship between Isabella Rucki on PSA Mohegan Sun and Londyn Pachota on Samurai V. Both competitors earned a score of 62.500%, and each went home with a coveted winner's cooler).

tebrae, broken ribs, and two weeks in a coma on a ventilator.

"She woke up from the coma, and I felt like I got a call from beyond the grave because we didn't know if she was going to be OK," explained Koford, who started competing the horse in May. "She asked if I would take 'Roy,' which of course I would, so she shipped him to me in Florida. It started out as altruistic to help a friend, but it turns out that I love this horse. He's unbelievable, and he gives me chill bumps."



US Dressage Finals

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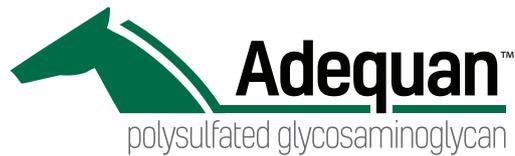
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