

USEF Intermediaire Championships Report

A strong showing for a pair of AHS members and their horses

HANOVERIANS ES RUBINO BELLISSIMO and Winwood represented the AHS at the USEF Intermediaire I championships at the Oaks Blenheim facility in San Juan Capistrano on June 18-20, 2004. Rubino Bellissimo (Rubinstein I-Bellisimo/Bergkristall) and rider Nicole Perry placed third overall in the Intermediaire I championships. Winwood (Wonderful-Arisma/Amarillo) and Heather Bender got off to a spooky start, but recovered to place sixth in the Intermediaire I class and fourth in the Intermediaire I Freestyle.

Rubino Bellissimo

Owner Violet Jen of Palo Alto, Calif., imported Rubino Bellissimo as a three-year-old after he passed his stallion testing in Germany. Trainer Nicole Perry of

Mountain View, Calif., has been riding Rubino Bellissimo for the past four years.

This was the first experience at the Festival of Champions for both Perry and Rubino. The eight-year-old chestnut stallion only moved up to Prix St. Georges and Intermediaire I last year. Perry, 26, was a very successful young rider, and has competed at many of the California Dressage Society and USDF Region 7 championships with numerous horses. This was also the first year that Rubino had both a full breeding season and a full-time show season.

In Friday's Prix St. Georges class, Rubino was the first horse to go and the first horse in the ring that weekend. With a score of 67.2%, they tied for third in the class.

[BY **SHERI SCOTT**]

"It probably was best," said Perry of her ride time. "I didn't have any time to get myself psyched out. I didn't hear any scores before I rode and the arena was still a little quiet."

"I was quite happy with the test. I had little things here and there. Overall the test was very smooth. I was a little nervous and the test was just a little bit of a blur."

Saturday the pair turned it up a notch, placing second with a 70.1%.

"It just felt super," said Perry. "No big bobbles. It could have been a little bit more through, but the combination of both of us being new to that level of competition and the prestige of it all—I couldn't have asked for a better test."

Perry had to follow Leslie Morse and Tip Top (winner of the Intermediaire I



SHERI SCOTT PHOTO

Heather Bender and Winwood shrugged off early nerves to place fourth in the Freestyle with a score of 71.82%.

championships) into the ring on Sunday. The sold-out crowd was still on their feet cheering Tip Top when the judge rang the bell for Rubino's ride.

"Sunday in the freestyle it got a little bit wild," said Perry. "You know how you always picture an Olympic ring full of people and lots of noise? He got a little bit bothered by that, so we had a little bit of tension in that test. But that's okay, he just needs to get used to it and I need to get used to it."

"I knew going down center line that it could be a little tense. The trot work was fine. Then we go into the canter, and do an extension. That's when he gave a little bit of a buck and a little bit of a spin. It took me completely off guard. You just have to laugh it off and keep going."

Perry rides Rubino to music from the sound track of Lemon Tree and the Disney World theme song. She describes it as very dramatic and powerful music that's fun to listen to. Perry did the choreography for the ride and Stephanie Hamar of DG Bar Ranch in Hanford, Calif., did the music editing.

Rubino scored 69.67% for sixth place in the freestyle. Luckily the freestyle only counts for 20 percent of the overall score. His average for the championships was 68.85% for third place behind Morse and Tip Top and Steffen Peters on Marlando.

Rubino is still green and Perry is trying to expose him to more audiences like he encountered at the Festival of Champions. They will be one of the featured performances at Dressage in the Wine Country in August, which also draws a large enthusiastic crowd.

Winwood

Heather Bender and Winwood, co-owned by Joan Wurtle, traveled from Wellington, Fla., for the championships. Winwood, who turned nine in August, almost left the arena in his Prix St. Georges test. The large electronic scoreboard in one corner of the ring had him on edge, and people were still getting settled in the grandstands and the VIP tents during his ride. Then a flash of light did him in when he was passing A.

"It was just so quick and it shouldn't have bothered him," explained Bender. "But it was just the timing of everything. Just one



Nicole Perry and Rubino Bellissimo

thing and he would have been fine. I kind of got him through the test after that. I was able to show the quality of the horse but I couldn't get the canter pirouettes. Then my goal was for him to get the best possible experience so that when he's a Grand Prix horse he has these positive miles behind him."

Bender took Winwood back in the ring to school immediately after the awards ceremony was over that day. Spectators were still in the grandstands and milling around by the side of the arena.

"I went down to the scoreboard right way with him," said Bender. "He was hotter than a pistol and his eyes were bugging out of his head. I'm riding and trying to keep him on the ground and spectators are walking up and I looked at them and asked 'does anyone have any cookies?'"

Apparently one of the vendors in the trade fair was giving out samples of horse cookies. Everyone said yes and started digging in their pockets and bags and ripping the plastic wrappers from around the cookies.

"My horse is so spoiled," laughed Bender. "He is going, 'Oh, I'm really frightened, I'm really frightened,' and blowing and huffing. Then all of a sudden he's going 'Cookies?' And he puts his feet on the ground and walks flat-footed over to the fence and

everyone started feeding him cookies. It was so funny."

"My horse is sweating and all concerned, and all of a sudden he's the cookie monster, standing in the corner by the scoreboard eating cookies. I had no more problems in that corner after he realized the people in the grandstand had cookies. He never looked at the grandstands again and he never cared about the scoreboards. He never cared about anything."

"My big secret to great dressage riding was giving the audience a bunch of cookies!" laughed Bender.

Bender was conservative in the Intermediaire I the following day, scoring 68.35% for sixth place – quite an improvement over Friday's 55.6%. Their freestyle on Sunday scored a 71.82% for fourth place.

Bender rode to bluesy jazz music that was composed for her by Eric Bikales of Hollywood, Calif., a long time friend and professional musician. Bikales has written and performed the music for all of Bender's freestyles over the years.

Peggy and Parry Thomas of Sun Valley, Idaho purchased Winwood at the Verden auction as a three-year-old. Brentina was just starting work in the Grand Prix at the time and Debbie McDonald decided the following year that she didn't have the time needed for a youngster. When they decided to sell Winwood, Bender was the only person they called.

"He was the horse for me," said Bender. "I'll never sell him."

Bender relocated to Wellington from Los Angeles in October 2001 to train with Michael Poulin. She also works with Carol Lavell, who is her neighbor in Wellington. Bender is located at Centaur Farm, owned by Jeannette Sassoon.

Winwood won the California Dressage Society Futurity as a four-year-old, and represented the U.S. in the Dressage Young Horse Championships in Arnheim, the Netherlands in 2000. ■

AHS member Sheri Scott is a nationally acclaimed photographer who resides in Folsom, Calif. Sheri's articles and award-winning photographs regularly appear in such publications as The Chronicle of the Horse, Dressage Today and Hunter & Sport Horse.