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Aulson Has It All At National Pair Championship

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Alan Aulson's five-day cross-country haul from Massachusetts with his pair of Morgans proved worthwhile, as he won the USEF National Pairs Championship, Oct. 6-8. The championship took place during the CAI-B Shady Oaks at Fritz and Phyllis Grupe's farm in Lodi, Calif. Despite the fact that Aulson was the only East Coast driver to make the trek, the class was filled with eight pairs.

The Aulson team planned their trip so that they could compete at the Woodside CDE (Calif.) two weeks before Shady Oaks. According to Aulson, the horses didn't suffer any adverse effects from the journey.

"It's tough either way—flying or driving," said Aulson.

Three Morgans made the trip, but Aulson didn't need to use his spare. Meddo's Chief George, 15, and Nordby Coalies Duke, 9, were able to do it all.

"Dressage went quite well," said Aulson, who scored 56.32 penalties from the five-member international jury, several of whom judged at the World Singles Championship in September. Defending National Pair Champion Fritz Grupe was just 4.2 penalties ahead of Aulson with his handsome pair of mixed warmbloods.

But the marathon and cones are Aulson's strength, and his speed and courage could not be beat. "Lisa [Singer] said to slow down in the obstacles, and we did, but we didn't go that slow. We had a smooth drive and didn't bang into anything but were still able to stay tight. The small horses are agile and handy," said Aulson.

Aulson won five of the eight obstacles, giving up the seventh one to his host, and the other two to Mark Schmidt from Whitefish, Mont., putting Aulson in the lead going into cones. Grupe wound up fourth on the marathon by a fluke when he made a wrong turn coming out of the last obstacle, putting him off the prescribed track for only about 30 meters. But according to the rules, it constituted a "deviation," and since a member of the ground jury observed it, they were obligated to add 10 penalties to his score. So much for home court advantage!

The Right Course

Sweden's Dan Henriksson designed the marathon course, most of which was already in existence and just required gating.

"The obstacles were superb, and they drove superbly," said Aulson.

The Duck Blind was newly built for the championship, and another hazard, Don't Fence Me In, was relocated. Three of the eight obstacles included water, testing the conditioning of the horses and ponies. The Duck Blind, the seventh obstacle, was particularly taxing being so close to the end of the marathon. Preliminary drivers only had six obstacles, while intermediate had seven, and the FEI divisions did all eight. The obstacles were situated so that spectators could, if inclined, run (or even walk) to see their favorite driver in every one.

The marathon course winds its way through hundreds of acres of cherry, apple and walnut orchards in addition to the vineyards, which grow Merlot and Chardonnay grapes, bottled under the Forest Glen label. In addition, there is ample natural habitat for game and streams for wild trout preservation. According to Phyllis Grupe, "The further people move away from nature in their busy lives, the more they need it."

Sunday's cones course looked simple but turned out to be deceiving. Aulson won this phase also, but with two knockdowns and a few time penalties. No one managed to drive a penalty-free round in the FEI division. Gene Hagberg was the only one to conquer the course in the intermediate division, and only four of the 32 preliminary drivers were penalty-free.

Berndl Is Best

Single horse driver Leslie Berndl secured the best overall score in the FEI division—147.25.

Berndl was happy to be competing at "home," living just an hour away from Shady Oaks, particularly after she and her gray, 9-year-old American Warmblood mare, Rio, put 10,000 miles on the odometer traveling east to CDEs this spring.

Rio and Berndl stayed on top of the other two competitors in the FEI single horse class from start to finish.

"I was happy with our dressage test," said Berndl. Although she occasionally trains at Shady Oaks, she said it was a "different world" with all the flags, tents and spectators.

The pair didn't have any problems in the marathon, decisively winning all eight obstacles. "My biggest problem is with the Fort Of No Appeals. That hazard has always been scary for me; I don't know why," said Berndl.

She was also worried about the newly built Duck Blind: "I didn't want to go through and not have enough horse left for the last hazard."

The only FEI competitor to make the time in cones, Berndl still had two balls down, but it was good enough to be the best of the FEI division. Rio is a real-life Cinderella story, going from an old plow horse to FEI winner. When Berndl got the mare, she was "half crazy, scared, and possibly abused. Every day Rio looks at me and says 'thank you.'"

Marie Kahrle, a member of the Swedish silver-medal team at the World Singles Championship in Pratoni del Vivaro, Italy, just a few weeks earlier, demonstrated the skill that won the medal by blowing away her competition in the marathon behind a borrowed horse. Although competing at the preliminary level, Kahrle left no doubt in anyone's mind that she is an awesome driver. She won six of the seven obstacles, was second in the other and was one of very few to have no penalties in cones.

Shining At Home

Phyllis Grupe managed not only to drive at her own competition but also to win in the preliminary single pony class. Her lovely black pony, Cincinnati Shine, was reportedly a pack pony before winning combined driving events. With his Welsh-like way of going, Cincinnati Shine won all three phases of the event. Their dressage score of 37.24 was the only entry of 58 to score in the 30s.

For the Grupe family, hosting the championship on their 1,200-acre ranch was “huge,” according to Bonner Murphy, daughter of Fritz and Phyllis Grupe and organizer of the competition.

“Fritz and Phyllis have worked so hard to develop driving in the west. They’ve produced this show to give competitors the opportunity to compete at the highest level,” said Murphy. “The pair drivers were so gracious to travel all the way here. It was a great honor, and the support they gave us was encouraging.”

Shady Oaks is also a championship social event, with more than 100 sponsors attending the marathon and the Saturday night competitors’ party. The theme for the party was a Hawaiian luau, complete with a pig roast and hula dancers performing for more than 300 people. And of course, Forest Glen wine!

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