

Niagara Tops Oaks Blenheim Grand Prix

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Jackie Freundlich

Only four of 43 riders mastered Leopoldo Palacios' challenging first round in the \$25,000 Oaks Blenheim Summer Classic II Grand Prix, Aug. 20. And only Erin Duffy aboard the 10-year-old stallion Niagara managed a clear round in the jump-off, to take the win in San Juan Capistrano, Calif.

For Duffy, spending four weeks at Spruce Meadows (Alta.) this summer helped her prepare for the win. She started the stallion, who was imported from Holland in March, in the 1.40-meter classes at Spruce Meadows and ended the circuit in the 1.50-meter classes in the international ring.

"It was a huge step up, and I was really proud of him," she said of her new partner, owned by Ron and Georgia Spogli of Cavallo Farms LLC. "He really stepped up to the plate."

Alan Waldman found the stallion, by Libero H, for Duffy in Holland, where he had won young horse championships indoors and outdoors and had a heavy breeding schedule.

At the Oaks, starting with the second jump on course, riders had to choose to ride forward in six strides or add for seven. With a tight time allowed, the turns to fence four and five had to be tidy. The sixth effort was a tall vertical with an option for seven or eight strides to a tough triple combination.

Although the triple was build with colorful poles, the second element on flat cups caused problems. Fences 10AB were airy and white, followed by a tight five strides to fence 11. Riders then tried to make up time by turning tight to a water jump and the final tall plank vertical.

"Riders had to be efficient," explained Palacios, known for setting a tight time allowed. "They didn't have to ride fast, but neat like [third-placed] Hap [Hansen]."

Second in the ring in the first round, Joie Gatlin, winner of the previous week's Grand Prix, had a flawless ride on Canyon Capital's Suncal's King. Time faults and "toes in the tub" were prevalent until the 12th and 17th jumpers entered the arena.

Jaime Guerra of Mexico rode clean on Santa Teresita Power Point, and veteran Hap Hansen, going for his 98th Grand Prix win, piloted His Horse around without a fault. Those efforts were not to be repeated until the 36th horse entered the field. Niagara, beautifully ridden by Duffy, also rose to the occasion and jumped without a rub.

"The time allowed made a difference, but I followed my plan," said Duffy. "I didn't want to override the black oxer so he'd jump around it. He needed to stay straight for the skinny and package up to the last vertical. He really listened and made a super effort."

The first three in the jump-off had rails, so Duffy had to be neat and clean for the win. "I had the luck of going last. I knew I had to be clean, but I didn't want to go slow enough to have 4 time faults. I wanted to be efficient but extra careful," she said.

And she was. She stopped the clock at 49.50 seconds with a clean round, beating Guerra and Hansen's fast four-fault rides and Gatlin's eight-fault round.

"What I love about Leopoldo's courses is it's always a riding lesson," said Duffy, of La Jolla, Calif. "He builds technical challenges; he's brilliant."

"She needed to ride calmly," said co-trainer Lori DeRosa. "It was their day."

Since Niagara has limited experience, Duffy plans to keep him in the futures classes and small grand prix events until next spring, when she will start the Indio (Calif.) circuit in the Friday grand prix classes and work her way up to the Sunday classes.