

A Destination Event

Now in its third year, the US Dressage Finals have become a standout championships

BY JENNIFER M. KEELER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SUSANJSTICKLE.COM



WORTH THE TRIP: Californian Elizabeth Landers trots to the 2015 US Dressage Finals Third Level Open Freestyle reserve championship aboard her Hanoverian gelding, His Highness Crusador

After a smashing debut in 2013 followed by explosive growth the next year, the US Dressage Finals presented by Adequan settled into a comfortable rhythm for its third annual edition, held November 5-8, 2015. The rolling green hills of the Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington once again welcomed competitors from across the country for this unique national head-to-head championship competition for adult-amateur and open riders at all levels from Training to Grand Prix. Even the occasionally-temperamental November Kentucky weather seemed more comfortable this year, offering mostly cool, sunny weather.

As the Finals have matured, they are proving to be what USDF leaders had hoped: not just another horse show, but a true destination event.

"I have had the privilege of attending all three of our national finals competitions—the first and third years as a judge, and the second year coaching several students who qualified," said FEI 4* judge Jayne Ayers, of Dousman, WI. "Each year has been an amazing experience. The Kentucky Horse Park has such a special atmosphere and so many amenities that make the event like none other."

"When I came to the Finals last year, I never thought I'd love the show as much as I did, but after I got home I immediately put in a time-off request at work for 2015 so that I could be sure to come back if I qualified," said adult-amateur rider Amy Gimbel, of Oldwick, NJ. Gimbel did more than just qualify, riding her Dutch Warmblood mare, Eye Candy, to multiple titles at the 2015 Finals.

Heather McCarthy, of Prairie Grove, IL, was another repeat Finals competitor, returning to the Bluegrass last year with several mounts of her own and with several clients and students, as well. "We look forward to coming to the Finals all year," McCarthy said. "When we're at Regionals [Great American/USDF Regional Championships], we all keep our fingers crossed, hoping we're going to qualify because it's such a fun show to come to."

Said USDF president George Williams: "The US Dressage Finals are fast becoming one of the most important dressage competitions on the American landscape, as well as proving to be an event that more and more competitors strive to be invited to. Each year we look for ways to build the competition and to continue to make it a positive and memorable experience for our competitors. We have new people coming to the Finals each year, but this time I especially noticed so many familiar faces. People are not just coming one time; they're coming back year after year, which I believe is indicative of the Finals becoming a true destination event."

Participation in the 2015 Finals was strong, remaining nearly identical to the record-setting numbers of 2014. There



"LIKE NONE OTHER": Adult amateur Amy Gimbel (shown winning the Second Level Freestyle AA championship and the Second Level AA reserve championship aboard her Eye Candy) had high praise for the Finals

were 396 exhibitors in Finals and open Dressage in the Bluegrass classes (357 competitors in the Finals divisions), with 36 states and all nine USDF regions represented. Florida led the state count with 38 riders in the Finals, followed by Texas (31), Ohio (27), and New Jersey (21). Riders ranging from 12-year-old Sophia Holloway, of St. Simons Island, GA, to Olympic dressage team bronze medalist and Roemer Foundation/USDF Hall of Fame inductee Michael Poulin, of DeLeon Springs, FL, competed for national titles and more than \$50,000 in prize money across 30 divisions. And once again, families, friends, and dressage enthusiasts who couldn't attend in person could share in the experience thanks to live online streaming of select classes on the US Equestrian Federation's USEF Network.

Despite its size and scope, a trademark of the Finals has been a special atmosphere and excellent organization thanks to an all-star team of staff, officials, and volunteers.

"Every year gets better from an organizational standpoint because we learn how to run the show more efficiently, which then of course benefits the competitors," said show manager Janine Malone, of Zebulon, NC. "Key members of the management team have worked together at the Finals every year and know what is needed to get the job done, and we always make a point to review the feedback from competitors and other stakeholders to see how we can make things better."

"For instance, one big change from previous years was the assignment of stalls in the [climate-controlled] Alltech barns," Malone said. "We always have far more requests for stalls in these barns than we are able to accommodate, and many felt that exhibitors competing in the earlier re-

A Special Dedication

The 2015 Finals were especially poignant, as the recent loss of three prominent figures in the US dressage community were remembered and honored during the event.

The competition was officially dedicated to former USDF Region 4 director and internationally known competition manager Lloyd Landkamer, who lost his battle with cancer on September 25. Landkamer was a supporter and believer in the Finals from their inception, serving on the show's organizing committee and managing the competition for the first two years.

"Lloyd was determined to be at the US Dressage Finals again this year," USDF president George Williams said during the emotional dedication ceremony. "Sadly, it was not meant to be, and we can only take some comfort in knowing he is here in spirit."

New perpetual trophies were presented in memory of two other dressage supporters who

were left in 2015. The Veronica Holt Perpetual Trophy for the Grand Prix Open champion, presented by USDF Region 5 and Friends, is named for the late FEI steward, USDF regional director, and longtime USDF and GMO volunteer who was the 2006 USDF Volunteer of the Year. Holt's daughter Sally Hayes presented the inaugural trophy to Gwen Poulin, of DeLeon Springs, FL, who rode Belinda Nairn-Wertman's Dutch Warmblood gelding, William, to an emotional victory.

USDF Region 4 honored the memory of another former regional director, Miki Christophersen, by creating a perpetual trophy to be presented to the Prix St. Georges Open champion. Christophersen, the 2011 USDF Volunteer of the Year, was a former Kansas City Dressage Society president and chair of the USDF Nominating Committee. The inaugural recipient was James Koford, of Raleigh, NC, who rode Maryanna Haymon's Hanoverian stallion, Doctor Wendell MF, to the title.



VERONICA HOLT PERPETUAL TROPHY:
Holt's daughter Sally Hayes holds the new trophy while current USDF Region 5 director Heather Petersen and USDF president George Williams look on



MIKI CHRISTOPHERSEN PERPETUAL TROPHY:
Honoring the late former USDF Region 4 director are her daughter, Cathy Hanna; son, Hunter Christophersen; widow, Ed Christophersen; and USDF president George Williams



gional championships had a big advantage getting stalls in the Alltech than those competing in the later regionals. For the first time this year, we allocated Alltech stalls based on the percentage of entries from each region. The competitors from each championship that requested Alltech stalls and completed their entries the earliest received their regions' allotment of those stalls. Hopefully, the competitors felt that this system was more equitable to everyone."

Finals first-timer Elizabeth Landers, one of 19 West Coast competitors, hauled two horses almost 50 hours from Agoura Hills, CA, to compete at First and Third Levels. For her efforts, she took home a Third Level Open Freestyle reserve championship with her Hanoverian gelding, His Highness Crusador.

"I'm still a little speechless. I've been in Europe and around the world, and I don't think I've ever seen a nicer place than this," said Landers. "From the beautiful grounds to the outstanding organization it's all been amazing, and the easy access to information is mind-boggling. To be able to sit here and follow live scores and go through my test with scores and comments all on my smartphone is almost unbelievable. The footing is the best I've ever seen—it's consistent everywhere you go, from warm-up to show ring—and the [indoor] Alltech Arena is truly spectacular, a dream

to ride in. What's especially interesting about the Alltech is that I have a horse who can be spooky, but he walked in and was immediately at ease; there's just something about it. I could almost not go back home, it's so beautiful here."

Officials and competitors alike agreed that the bar has been raised for horses and riders coming to the Finals.

"I definitely think the competition has been tougher here this year, and it's a great thing to see," said Rachael Hicks. The adult amateur from Prospect, KY, found herself in the winner's circle several times during the week, including to accept the Janine Westmoreland Malone Perpetual Trophy presented by USDF for winning the Prix St. Georges Adult Amateur Championship with her Westfalen gelding, Fabio Bellini. "There wasn't a single time where you saw an exhibitor and wondered how they got there. The quality was very impressive."

"I judged the first competition in 2013, and I was thrilled to see that the quality of the horses and the riding was at a much higher standard this year," said FEI 4* judge Janet Foy, of Colorado Springs, CO. "It was exciting to judge large classes with everyone scoring in the high 60-percent to lower 70-percent range, even with some mistakes. I did not see one rider that needed an improved seat! And I saw horses that are par with top-quality horses in Europe." ➔



What actually makes "good" footing good?

As horsemen, we love to talk about the footing. Good, bad, but never indifferent. Good footing can actually increase the longevity of a horse's career. Bad footing can send you straight to the vet. Recently the FEI published a white paper discussing the science behind good footing. The same scientific approach that has been applied to Attwood's premium blends for almost twenty years.

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An Unexpected Journey

For young dressage professional Christine Landry, of East Dennis, MA, competing at the US Dressage Finals wasn't even a pipe dream. But when a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity presents itself from the most unlikely of circumstances, as Landry put it, "You have to make it happen."

A lifelong dressage enthusiast, Landry, now 26, got her big break after graduating from high school, when she became a working student for "the Bills" William Warren and Bill McMullin. She worked at Warren-McMullin Dressage in Stoughton, MA, for three years while earning a business degree from Framingham (MA) State University.

Then another door opened: "I got a job working for Steffen and Shannon Peters in San Diego from 2011 to 2012," Landry said. "It was incredible; the amount of knowledge I gained was amazing."

During her stint, Landry accompanied Lientje Schueler, then assistant trainer at Team Peters, on a trip to Germany. "While we were there I saw Santino, who was a three-year-old, and it was love at first sight," Landry recalled. But even as she took the leap to purchase the young Hanoverian, more changes were in the air. "At the same time, I was invited to stay and train [in Germany]. So I went home for the summer, finished my job in San Diego, and went back to Germany, where I was reunited with Santino. I eventually brought him home the following year, and we started doing the Four-Year-Old classes. He was always super-talented."

But before long, the honeymoon was over. "When he turned five, everything changed. All of a sudden he became a real handful—just so unhappy and naughty to work with. No one could figure out what was happening or why, and it just went on and on with no answer in sight. It felt like a dead end, and I was devastated for both of us," said Landry. "Finally, out of desperation, we did a nuclear scan, and everything lit up. The vet was like, 'Huh, maybe we should have checked for Lyme disease earlier.' But who would have thought it?"

After a lengthy course of treatment, Santino slowly reverted to the horse Landry had fallen in love with. "It turned out that all the bad behavior was a result of the physical symptoms he was experiencing from Lyme, but we didn't know it. All of a sudden, his great attitude was back. He seemed to say, 'OK, I can do this,' and he was my teammate again."

Having lost nearly a year, the young pair cautiously returned to showing in the spring of 2015. They started out at First Level and immediately qualified for the Great American/USDF Region 8 Championship. So



I DO, I DO! Even her upcoming nuptials couldn't keep young dressage pro Christine Landry from making the trip to the Finals with her horse, Santino

"We went ahead and tried Second Level, and he just got better and better and suddenly we were qualified for that too," said Landry. "We went to Regionals, and he won! The Finals weren't ever on my radar because I was just so grateful to have my horse back. Then we received the Finals invitation, and I couldn't believe it. It was surreal to even think that we could have made it after what we'd been through."

Although the invitation was tempting, Landry had concerns about attending the Finals. She was working full-time for Massachusetts-based Grand Prix-level rider and trainer Cindi Rose Wylie. Money was tight, and the prospect of making the thousand-mile trip to Kentucky was daunting. What's more, Landry had her mind on something even more important: her upcoming wedding.

As it has for several other Finals competitors, crowdfunding saved the day. Explained Landry: "I set up a GoFundMe account, and a lot of friends really helped out with donations. My fiancé, Chris, and I packed our truck and drove ourselves down, trying to make things as affordable as possible. The weekend before we left for the Finals was like a whirlwind with trying to get wedding stuff done, cake tastings and all that; thank goodness I have my mom to help me! To have all of this happen all at once is just crazy."

The craziness paid off. Landry and the horse she refused to give up on competed in both the First and Second Level divisions at the US Dressage Finals, placing fifth in the hard-fought First Level Open Championship.

"If you want it badly enough, you have to make it happen one way or another," Landry said. "You hope and you pray and you find the money. It's an opportunity that can't be passed up. Now I'll go home and can't wait to wear that wedding dress, but I sure hope to be back."

Regions Cup Introduced at 2015 Finals

Adding another element of competition and spurring on a bit of regional rivalry, the top-scoring riders in various divisions from each of the Great American/USDF Regional Championships competed on regional teams in the inaugural US Dressage Finals Regions Cup.

Explained show manager Janine Malone: "A successful regional-championship program is the foundation of the US Dressage Finals, so from the beginning the organizing committee has considered ways to incorporate better recognition of the regions and of the competitors that qualified from each regional championship. We also wanted the Finals to include a lighthearted component that would add interest to the event. [USDF president] George Williams studied regional-championships results to determine how the teams could be as evenly matched as possible regardless of the number of competitors they had in attendance. At the same time, we wanted to ensure that adult amateurs would be represented and that the system would be reasonably uncomplicated and fair. Since this was the first year of the Regions Cup, I'm sure that plan will be tweaked going forward, but I hope we added another layer of interest to the event."

The three-member Regions Cup teams comprised the highest-scoring eligible horse/rider combinations in the Training and First Level championship classes (open or adult amateur) as well as in the FEI-level championship classes (open or adult amateur) at each of the nine Great American/USDF Regional Championships. The highest-scoring eligible adult-amateur horse/rider combination in the Second through Fourth Level Regional Championship classes was named as the third member of each regional team.

Coming out on top after three days of championship competition was Region 3—which happened to send 84 competitors to the 2015 Finals, the most of the nine USDF regions. Team Region 3 (Kathryn Stoy/Rapunzel of Hillock, First Level open; Camilla Van Liew/Dartesch, Third Level AA; and James Koford/Doctor Wendell MF, Prix St. Georges open) earned a winning average score of 70.762 percent. Finishing in second was Team Region 8 (David Collins/Bojing, Jennifer Huber/Duchesse du Pre, and Heather Mason/Romantico SF) with 70.039. Team Region 2 (Nicole Trapp/Paolucius, Rachael Hicks/Don Cartier, and Heather McCarthy/Saphira) placed third with 69.629.

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"I have to admit that I was very skeptical about the idea of the Finals," said FEI 4* judge Natalie Lamping, of Ocala, FL. "But I judged last year and was honored to be asked to return, and once again the organizers did an amazing job. I agree that the quality has improved; but more importantly, the riders are simply so excited to be there, even the ones that had bad luck with their rides. I also see how this event is so important to so many adult-amateur riders that they are willing to make sacrifices to be part of it, and it's these people who support and pay for our sport. I am now a believer." ▲

Jennifer M. Keeler, of Lexington, KY, is a freelance writer and marketer who served as the press officer for the 2015 US Dressage Finals. Her website is YellowHorseMarketing.com.

Turn to page 48 for photos and complete results from the 2015 US Dressage Finals presented by Adequan.

US Dressage Finals by the Numbers

TOP STATES BY # OF ENTRIES:

Florida = 38
 Texas = 32
 Ohio = 27
 New Jersey = 21
 Michigan = 18
 Kentucky = 18
 North Carolina = 17
 Virginia = 14
 Georgia = 14
 California = 13
 Maryland = 13
 Illinois = 13
 New York = 12
 Alabama = 11
 South Carolina = 11
 Missouri = 10

TOP REGIONS BY # OF ENTRIES:

Region 3 = 84
 Region 1 = 60
 Region 8 = 58
 Region 2 = 57
 Region 4 = 50
 Region 9 = 38
 Region 7 = 12
 Region 5 = 10
 Region 6 = 4

Note: These are the regions through which a horse/rider combination qualified for the US Dressage Finals, which is not necessarily their "home" region as competitors may declare in another region for a particular year.

Digital Edition Bonus Content

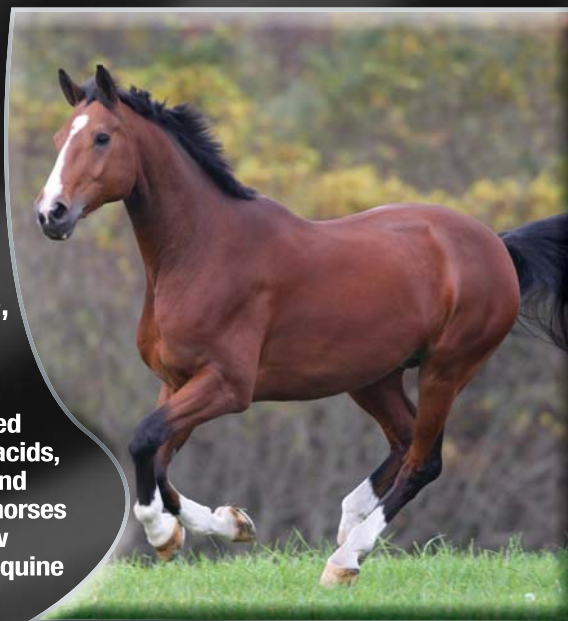


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