

Felicitas Hendricks Hits All The Right Notes



By Alice Collins
for *Wellington International*

Germany's 23-year-old sensation Felicitas Hendricks allowed herself to smile as she and Drombusch OLD performed their final piaffe at X in the CDI4* Grand Prix Freestyle, presented by US PRE Association, as the audience clapped enthusiastically to the beat of their lively music.

The pair — unbeaten in all four of their starts during AGDF 2024 — added week three's marquee 'Friday Night Stars' class to their burgeoning tally with a delightful 78.79% performance on January 26.

Sweden's Lövsta Stuteri riders filled the remaining two podium places, with Tinne Vilhelmson Silfvén piloting the 15-year-old Devanto (by De Chirico x Lorentin) to 77.11%, and Caroline Darcourt and the 14-year-old Lord Django (by Stalypso x Londonderry) tucking in behind on 76.89%.

Hendricks and her own 13-year-old Drombusch OLD (by Destano x Dimaggio) have exploded onto the senior stage in 2024, and their freestyle

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LINDSAY BROCK
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Trio of Personal Bests Boosts Marie Vonderheyden to Para Dressage Glory at AGDF

By Alice Collins
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Para international action featured across the Grades during AGDF 3. It was the Grade I French rider Marie Vonderheyden who was crowned the week's overall High Point Champion after an epic three days of competition. She rode her own 11-year-old Hanoverian Bombastic D Arion (by Callaho's Benicio) to a trio of personal bests, blowing

their previous high scores out of the water by huge margins. They topped 72% in both the Grand Prix A and B tests, then posted a commanding 75.223% in the Freestyle.

The overall champions were calculated with 40% weighting on each of the Grand Prix tests, and 20% for the Freestyle. Last year's champion, Beatrice De Lavalette (USA), finished reserve champion.

Vonderheyden is a former FEI level event rider, but a hacking accident in 2015 left her with a traumatic brain injury and in a coma. She was unable to speak or swallow, her memory was largely erased and the right side of her body was paralyzed. Following multiple brain surgeries and extensive therapies, she returned to the international ring in 2019 as a Para equestrian. She competes at Grade I — the Grade for the most severely impaired riders.

The 33-year-old was delighted to claim the champion's sash during AGDF 3, saying, "It's awesome and has given me motivation for the season. It's super cool, especially as this is pretty new music and it was the first international show with this freestyle. Bombastic is exceptional. He has come on very far and is a big mover, a real athlete. My body moves in a weird way — I have to work on that — and on the left side I have tingling. I need to work hard to control my body and



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Para Dressage Glory

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my breathing.

“Every morning and evening I stretch myself to be able to ride and be better for my horse. I do a lot [physically] in order to be able to move better in my sport. I need to be good for the horse, and he needs to be a perfect guy when we have a competition,” she added.

Vonderheyden has even more reason to be excited this year as she has been chosen as a torch bearer for the 2024 Paris Olympics. In the immediate term, she will stay in Wellington until the end of March before returning to Europe and eyeing a place on the French squad for the Paris Paralympics this summer.

Grade II rider Beatrice De

Lavalette scooped two wins aboard her partner of two years, Sixth Sense. The 14-year-old Oldenburg gelding scored over 71% in all three tests. In the Grade II Freestyle, they posted 73.656%, but were pipped to the win by fellow American Fiona Howard, who rode Fleuresse 4 to 75.678%.

De Lavalette, who lost both of her lower legs in the 2016 Brussels Airport bombing, said, “The first day we had some issues in the warm-up and that affected the trot in the ring, but on Saturday the horse was perfect. In the freestyle he was a little below the vertical, but still good, and I was glad he didn’t freak out at the music — a violin remix of popular songs — as this was the first time we did it together in the ring.”

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Para Dressage Glory

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The 25-year-old De Lavalette has forged a strong bond with the son of Sir Donnerhall, who is owned by her parents Elizabeth and Nicolas De Lavalette. "It was tough in the beginning getting to know each other as he'd never done Para before and my position wasn't what it is now on the horse," she said. "I was leaning back a lot more as a counterbalance, because from the waist down there's nothing to really hold me up.

"After Doha in February last year I left Sixth Sense at Kasselmans [in Germany] for a few months and after that the connection between us was much better," she continued. "Then when I came back, I switched to training with Jen Baumert and it's been amazing. The connection has grown so much, and how much we've improved is incredible."

De Lavalette — who made her international debut on Sixth Sense at AGDF in 2022 — will return to Hof Kasselmann in April for the summer season and is another athlete eyeing selection for the Paris Games.



Howard's Oldenburg mare Fleuresse 4, by For Romance, is only seven and is a relatively new ride for her. She is owned by the rider together with Elizabeth Bagsby, Julian Howard and Sharon Day. This was only their second international show together. Howard suffers from dystonia, a neuromuscular condition that causes involuntary muscle contractions and twisting. She is also a former FEI level Reining competitor.

"I'm still figuring Fleuresse out," explained the 34-year-old. "We improved every single day, which is great. She's never been in a stadium like Global, so I was just seeing how she was going to be, and I think I learned a lot. For a young horse and with my disability it's a lot of adapting and figuring out what works.

"For the Freestyle, I basically

trotted two circles in the warmup and she felt ready. When the music started, she clicked with me. She needs to gain some strength but she's so talented and I feel like I need to keep getting better so I can do her justice and she can show how cool she is," added Howard, who has been traveling back and forth to Europe where Jagger, her more experienced horse, is currently based.

She is grateful for the opportunity to show at AGDF, adding, "Global is the best place to set you up for championships. The stadium arena gives you the championships feeling — it's the one place that really gives you that. It's a tough arena, but it's the best preparation in the lead-up to Paris."

At Grade III, Canada's Lauren Barwick racked up a pair of

wins on her own 12-year-old Westfalian gelding, Sandrino (by Spirit Of Westfalia). They were pipped in the Grand Prix A test by Rebecca Hart (USA) and El Corona Texel, but topped the Grand Prix B with 70.889%, before heading up the freestyle with 74.211%.

In the Grade V, Cynthia Screnci's two horses duked it out. In the Grand Prix A test, her own and Volado Farms's 17-year-old KWPN gelding Sir Chipoli came out on top with 69.914%. In the Grand Prix B test her other horse, the inexperienced For Memory 4 — a decade younger than Sir Chipoli — squeaked ahead by just 0.04 percentage points, claiming the class with 68.772%. The seven-year-old Hanoverian by For Dance was competing in his first CPEDI at Grand Prix level.

Felicitas Hendricks

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was full of technical complexity: curving lines of changes, double pirouettes, passage half-pass and piaffe pirouettes. Hendricks was just 0.3 percentage points shy of her career high score with Drombusch, and would probably have bettered it but for two very small blips in the test.

"It was so much fun," said Hendricks, who has ridden Drombusch since he was

six, acquiring him through her trainer and uncle, Cristoph Koschel. "People clapping is exactly what I want to achieve with my music. I want to have good vibes and a party in the house — I'm so happy that we achieved that.

"Even though we had some small miscommunications we had a lot of highlights, and they were definitely much brighter than the lowlights," added Hendricks, whose groom Lauren McNabb was awarded the \$500 Grooms Prize, sponsored by

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Felicitas Hendricks

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Massa Horses. "I'm always up for a challenge, and grand prix is challenging. But I've got a great horse by my side who makes this whole journey — learning as much as I possibly can — so much fun."

The seven-time Olympian Vilhelmson Silfvén used a reworked version of her familiar "Puttin' on the Ritz" freestyle from a decade ago and rode Devanto to it for the first time — which brought its own challenges.

"It was a whole new floor plan, which I never rode before, so that was an adventure and I really had to use my brain and think about where to go," she admitted. "I think it suits Devanto much better. I've had him for three years now and he's a fun horse. He has a lot going on and you have to be smarter than him all the time. He wants to do a lot — much too much sometimes.

"Here [at AGDF] we have

this super opportunity to show a lot without traveling, and to get to train and present new freestyles, try them, and try them out again. We can compete with a lot of atmosphere, and in there it feels like it's a huge crowd because it's really loud — it's so good for the horses to get to do that."

Darcourt, who is in Wellington for her fourth AGDF season, said, "Django felt very happy. Every time I enter the arena on a Friday night, he's so motivated. He goes up a gear and really loves to perform here. I also changed the floor plan tonight and I think this one suits him better."

Judge from C Henning Lehrmann (GER) enjoyed the opportunity to reward the rides with high marks, commenting, "It was fun and an honor to judge, because all three top riders did a really positive presentation in a very horse-friendly way. That is what we want to see."

Best Turned Out

Congratulations to a well-dressed trio of Isabela Fielder, Josh Albrecht & Tina Irwin

winner of the AGDF 5 Best Turned Out Award



Pictured left to right: Carol Cohen-Hodess, Isabella Fielder, Josh Albrecht, Tina Irwin, Michele Hundt

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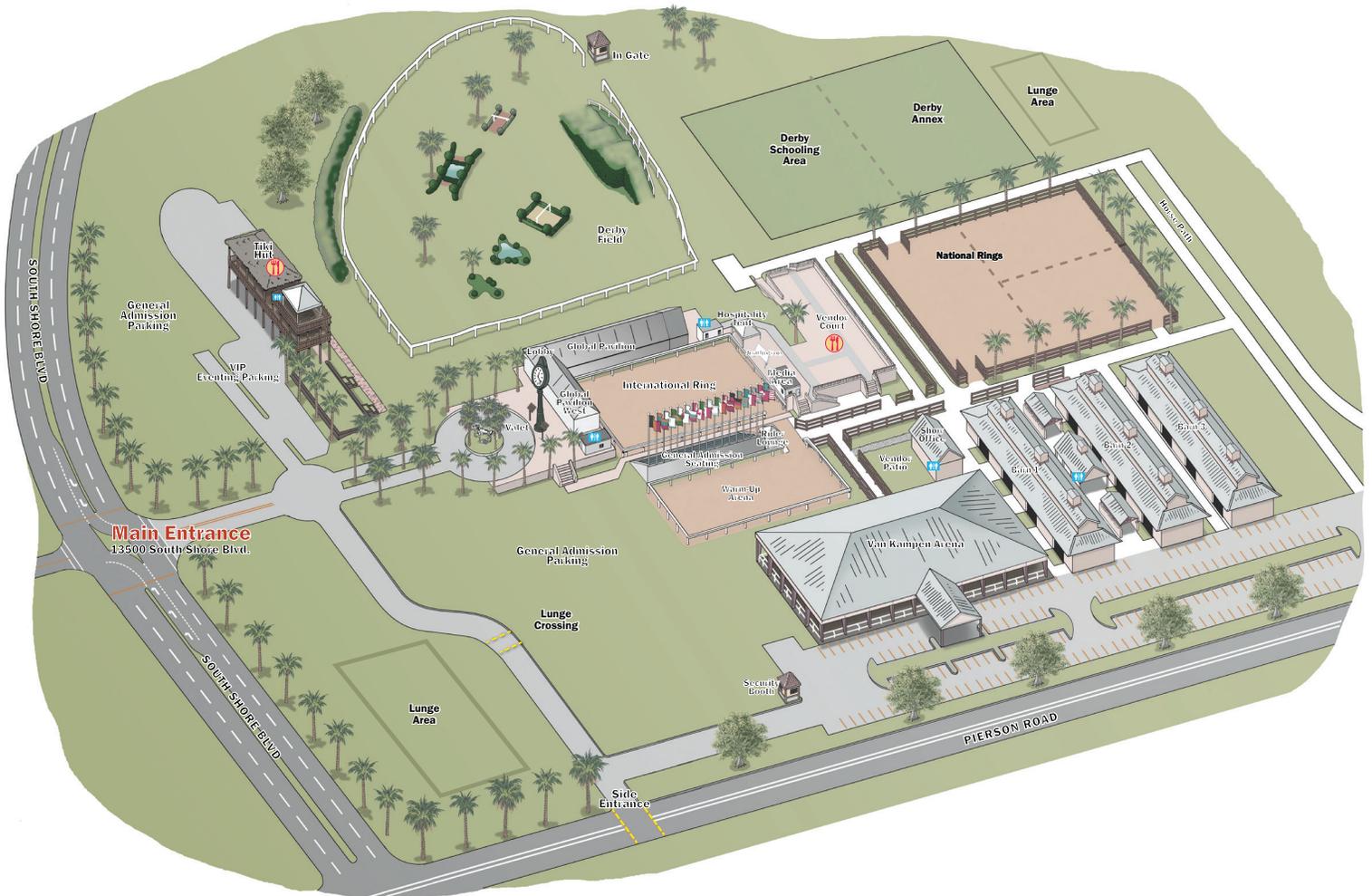
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SPECIAL AWARD WINNERS

AGDF 1



C U at X Tack's X- Factor Award winner Lori Sack riding Drakkar Noir 3 – with Sarah Hoog presenting – was the beautifully turned out during AGDF 1.



Omega Alpha Healthy Horse Award winner during AGDF 1 was Quarter Lion, ridden in the Grand Prix by Estelle Schurink with coach Kevin Kohmann.



Winner of the **Vita Flex Victory Pass Award** was Heather Blitz riding Valentina, who won the Developing Horse Grand Prix. Pictured with Todd Flettrich.



Taryn Harnett's Grand Prix ride on Der Prinz 3 earned her the **N2 Saddlery Peak Performance Award** and the final score for her USDF Gold Medal.

AGDF 3



C U at X Tack 's X- Factor Award was presented by Sarah Hoog to Micah Deligdish riding Santos.



Omega Alpha Healthy Horse Award winner was Flirt, ridden in the Grand Prix by owner/trainer Lori Bell.



Winner of the **Vita Flex Victory Pass Award** was Annie McFee, who rode S Jewel's Serondello to the win in Training Level Test III with coach Julio Mendoza, a 2023 Pan-American gold medalist.



The winner of the **N2 Saddlery Peak Performance Award** was Ashley Rand riding Heimdals Champ. Pictured with coach Scott Hassler.



Felicitas Hendricks was chosen by her peers to receive **The People's Choice Award** for exemplary horsemanship, sportsmanship and performance. The Award is sponsored by Illustrated Properties and was presented by Ann Louise Cook.



Rebecca Hart is presented with the **Zen Elite Award**. This special honor is given to a positive person with passion, enthusiasm, great horsemanship, and someone who encourages other riders, supports teammates and competitors. In short, someone who is "Zen."

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N2 Saddlery - What Lies Beneath the Official Saddle of the U.S. Dressage Team?

Most dressage enthusiasts know that N2 Saddlery is the Official Saddle of the U.S. Dressage Team. Most dressage enthusiasts also know that Adrienne Lyle and Sabine Schut-Kery rode down centerline to their Olympic silver medals in N2 Saddles, as did Pan-American gold medalist Sarah Tubman and bronze medalist Jennifer Baumert.

What some people don't know is why these top professionals and so many others not only ride in N2 saddles, but also recommend them for their amateur clients. N2 Saddles are designed to be a whole new breed of saddle. As a Grand Prix dressage rider and Certified Master Saddle Fitter through the Society of Master Saddler of the UK, Sue Newell, Managing Director of N2 Saddlery, has a full understanding of saddle design and fit. She designed the N2 Saddle to meet both the needs of the horse and the needs of the rider. Thanks to this innovative design, N2 Saddles allow the horse to perform freely and comfortably through the back and shoulders, while at the same time positioning the rider to effectively communicate with their horse.

Top riders not only recognize how their N2 Saddles help them and their horses succeed, but also understand the



advantage they can provide to the amateur students and the riders they coach.

In addition, N2 Saddles are crafted from the finest

European sourced leathers. This uncompromising quality and attention to detail is unparalleled in the industry. Most riders initially see the

beauty of the saddles and leathers combined with the detail of the designs, but sometimes don't realize what lies beneath.

Every N2 Saddle combines a beautiful saddle with an intrinsic design that affords close contact with the horse through a masterfully designed tree that provides maximum freedom for the horse's shoulder. In addition to

superior design and fine craftsmanship, N2 Saddlery understands that fit involves an ongoing relationship. Horses change and develop

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N2 Saddlery

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requiring adjustments and maintenance to the saddles. N2 Saddlery takes pride in their meticulous fitting process, ensuring that each saddle is customized to the unique needs of the horse and rider. This attention to detail sets N2 Saddlery apart from other saddle brands, as they understand that a proper fit is crucial for the comfort and performance of both horse and rider.

Furthermore, N2 Saddlery offers a variety of models to suit different body types and riding styles. Whether a deep seat for added security or a more open seat for greater freedom of movement, N2 Saddlery has a saddle that will

meet anyone's needs. With options for adjustable tree widths, flap lengths and panel configurations, riders can truly customize their saddle to achieve the perfect fit.

So, what lies beneath the Official Saddle of the U.S. Dressage Team? It is a saddle that combines innovative design, meticulous fit and superior craftsmanship to create a saddle that allows both horse and rider to perform at their best. N2 Saddlery has truly revolutionized the dressage saddle industry, and it's no wonder that top professionals and amateurs alike choose N2 Saddles for their equestrian pursuits.

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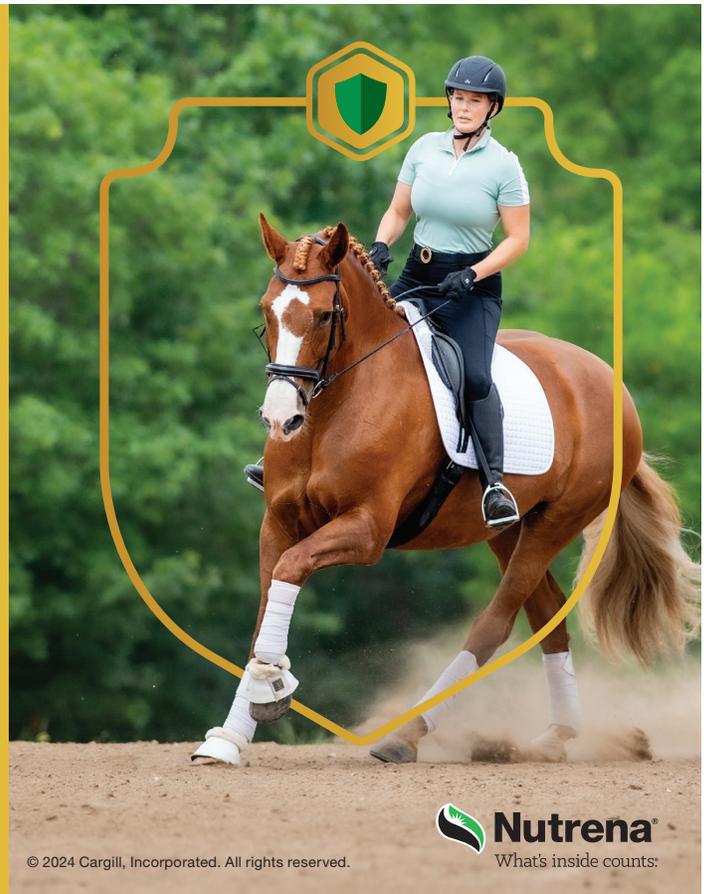
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