

October 6, 2006

French Returns To His Roots For WCHR Professional Finals Victory

Tricia Booker

John French, the final rider in the Stillwell-Hansen World Champion Hunter Rider Professional Finals, walked into the ring needing to nail the fourth and final round to clinch the victory.

With his parents, Jill and Bob French, Sparks, Md., sitting in the Show Place Arena on Oct. 6 to cheer him on, John tactfully and brilliantly guided his mount to the highest fourth-round score to edge Peter Pletcher by .17 points to claim the title as 2006 Monarch International/Show Circuit Magazine Professional World Champion Hunter Rider at the Capital Challenge.

This year's Pro Finals, a class based on the World Show Jumping Championship format in which four riders jump four rounds on four different horses, was one of the most competitive in recent years. Six judges presided and sat in pairs: Sue Ashe and Hap Hansen; Mindy Minetto and Jimmy Clapperton; John Roper and Randy Mullins.

French and Pletcher were joined by Scott Stewart and Louise Serio, the defending champion, in the Friday evening class. All four riders had previously won this title and knew just what it takes to earn top scores.

"It means a lot showing against these other riders," said French, of Gilroy, Calif. "They're really great riders."

The four horses donated for the class, which the riders collectively said was the best group of hunter-type horses they'd ever had, included: Madaline and Rosemary Toulas' Intuition; Morgan Hill Partners' Locatelli; Jimmy and Danielle Torano's Larona; and Crystal Row/Rolling Oaks' Fortunate.

Stewart led the way after the first round with an 87.33 aboard Intuition, just .33 points ahead of French who rode Fortunate. Serio's first mount, Locatelli, was a little fresh, and she stood fourth with 80.66, while Pletcher had a rub with Larona and an 84.66.

French moved into first place in the second round with a solid ride on Larona, although Pletcher was just behind with the round's best score on Locatelli. Stewart dropped to third aboard Fortunate, and Serio remained fourth after her trip on Intuition.

For the third round, course designer Michael Rheinheimer adjusted the course to include a bending line. Pletcher nailed it aboard Intuition for the best single round score of the class with a 90. He moved into the lead, with French 4.5 points behind after his trip on Locatelli. After their rides, Stewart and Serio were still within striking distance, however.

A new feature this year included a handy hunter course as the fourth and final round. The riders negotiated an S-turn over the first three fences and then hand-galloped to a single oxer in the center of the ring. A sweeping rollback and an in-and-out concluded the course.

Stewart led off aboard Locatelli, and his great turns and bold hand-gallop earned a huge ovation from the crowd, which turned to boos when the score of 88 was announced. He finished with 337.99.

Serio started out strong with Larona, but an awkward jump at fence 2 left her with a score of 74.33 for a total of 323.98 and fourth place.

Pletcher's ride on Fortunate included nice smooth turns, but perhaps his wider path kept him to an 84.66, for a total of 346.82, eventually good for second place.

For his final ride, French was fortunate to have Intuition, who was the top-scoring horse. "I knew this horse a little bit, and he's my kind of ride," he said. "I'm not an aggressive rider and don't use a lot of leg, and this horse suited me.

"This [round] was my best ride," he added. "Peter was several points ahead of me, so I needed a good score. It turned out to be just enough." French, 44, grew up in Maryland, about 30 minutes from the Prince Georges Equestrian Center, but he's spent the past 18 years on the West Coast. This was the third time he'd contested the WCHR Professional Finals and his second title, having also won the featured WCHR class in 2000.

"This was fantastic," said French. "Today was my father's birthday too. It was so nice to come back to Maryland and to have the show go so well."