



# Endurance

A Wet and Wild Ride

Beginning long before the rooster crowed, it was practically still nighttime. In order to head out before dawn, there is preparation, and a lot of it. But for the riders who call endurance their sport, it isn't such a chore to wake up before some of the world has even gone to bed. It's their passion, and they wouldn't have it any other way.

Team USA brought a diverse and excited team to Aachen, one hoping to bring home an endurance world championship medal—something that hadn't been done in more than eight years. Valerie Kanavy was the last individual to do it in 1998 (and also 1994), and with her knowledge and skills as the team's chef d'equipe, there were hopes that this would be the year to do it again.

But, it didn't turn out that way. Yet, you would not have known it from the faces of the endurance athletes that represented our country. For them, to compete was to win, in and of itself. Their spirit and energy served as a wonderful reminder that simply starting the world championship race was to succeed in making it to the world stage. Completing the race was to satisfy a personal victory. Meeting each of these riders was an honor, because theirs is a special breed.

Team USA was comprised of five riders from across the country: Kathryn Downs of Somerville, ME; Joseph Mattingley of Scales Mound, IL; Christoph Schork of Moab, UT; Meg Sleeper, DVM, of Frenchtown, NJ; and alternate Jennifer Neihaus of Cloverdale, CA. These five riders showed their competition the best our country had to offer, and it was more than enough.

Early on, teammate Stephen Rojek and his horse Finch, a 10-year-old Arabian gelding, were pulled due to horse and rider illness. This meant Neihaus and her 14-year-old Arabian gelding Cheyenne XII were called into competition.

At 6:00 a.m. on a wet and windy morning just outside of the Aachen Main Stadium near the start of the cross-country course, 159 riders took off on the 100-mile route that saw a mix of terrain and territory through three countries—Germany, The Netherlands and Belgium. The cooler than normal temperatures were something of a blessing to those who had expected more of what the region had experienced only a month before the start of the WEG—soaring temperatures into the 90s that were not only abnormal, but could cause a variety of concerns for the horses and their riders.

In endurance, the horses and riders face a series of vet gates along their day-long route. These spots are mandatory stops where the rider dismounts and a veterinary team checks out the horse's fitness (from heart rate to metabolics to soundness) before allowing the horse-and-rider team to continue to the next vet gate. Food and water for horse and rider are also provided at these checkpoints. Finishing the race with a horse in good condition is paramount. At any point, the horse may be declared lame and may be withdrawn from the competition.

At the World Championships, individual and team medals are presented. A single horse-and-rider's time is used to determine the individual champion. The team championship is decided based on the combined times of three predetermined "team score" members. At Aachen, 159 riders started the race, and only 65 finished.

Leading the way in the final placings for the Americans was Downs, the senior member of the entire U.S. contingent sent to Aachen. Delighted to simply have been chosen to represent her country, Downs was a wonderful reminder of how important it is to not let go of a dream.

"I'm just a nurse from Maine," said Downs the morning after completing the 100-mile course at a press conference. "To represent my country was...well, it's just something that I can't put into words." Her emotion was evident as her eyes welled with tears despite being hidden behind her dark glasses.

"If it weren't for the National Federation, I wouldn't have been able to come here to compete. It's just been amazing and I'm so thankful," she said.



And Bronkhorst (2)

*Kathryn Downs gained a legion of fans in the endurance world aboard her Pygmalion. At age 63, Downs was the American contingent's senior member, and she also co-carried the American flag during the opening ceremonies.*



Charles Mann

*Above: Meg Sleeper, DVM, and Shyrocco Troilus finished second among Americans and 22nd overall in Aachen.*

*Below: Christoph Schork and Taj Rai Hasan found themselves eliminated due to lameness at Gate 4 at the WEG.*

Her efforts were Herculean in nature, and there wasn't a single word of complaint, not in the pouring cold rain, not at the vet gates, not at all. Impressive.

With her 10-year-old Arabian gelding Pygmalion, Downs entered Gate 1 in 50th place, and the pair climbed in the rankings during the day. Perhaps "slow and steady wins the race" was their mantra. And while they did not "win" the race, they continued on their work, advancing to 20th place by Gate 2, and again five more spots to land at 15th at Gate 3. They finished the race at that same position— 15th—on a time of 10 hours, six minutes and 27 seconds, going at an average speed of 9.84 mph (15.83 km/hour), with a recovery time of 24 minutes and 21 seconds.

Downs earned not only the admiration of her teammates, but of all those athletes who, regardless of age, decide they want to take part. "I just love the sport," she said.

The second American to cross the finish line in the Main Stadium was Sleeper and her 14-year-old Half-Arabian gelding Shyrocco Troilus. Their 22nd-place ride was completed in 10 hours, 12 minutes and 20 seconds.

Sleeper was supportive of her team and said that if the weather conditions had been less damp, where more firm footing was the track, her team would have benefited. But, these weren't sour grapes from the rider as she beamed with satisfaction, knowing that she and her mount did their best and on a course that was very technical and rife with difficult situations.

Sleeper and Shyrocco Troilus came into Gate 1 at 68th and climbed 24 spots to check into Gate 3 at 34th position. They passed 11 more riders by Gate 4, checking in at 23rd. Over the entire course, they averaged a speed of 9.74 mph (15.68 km/hour) and posted a recovery time of 25 minutes and 57 seconds.

Niehaus and the 14-year-old Arabian gelding Cheyenne XII (owned by Ruth Waltenspiel and Kirsten Bernstein) were the third Americans to enter the Main Stadium after a long and successful test. The pair finished the race in 49th place on a time of 11 hours, 57 minutes and 26 seconds. Their average speed across the course was 8.31 mph (13.38 km/hour).

The rider shared in her estimation of the difficult course and felt that it was a fair challenge. At Gate 1, the pair came in at 75th place, dipping back a bit at Gate 2, where they entered at 81st. It was back to 75th by Gate 3, and they climbed six spots to come in at 69th place by Gate 4.

As for the other members of Endurance Team USA, it was elimination due to lameness that prevented their finish.



Bob Langrish

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Mattingley and the 11-year-old Arabian gelding SA Laribou were pulled at Gate 4 due to lameness. The pair made it to Gate 1 at 78th place; Gate 2 at 83rd place; and Gate 3 at 70th place. Their elimination left four members of the team on course.

It was at Gate 5 that the combination of Schork and his eight-year-old Arabian gelding Taj Rai Hasan (who he co-owns with Dian Woodward), were pulled at the last vet check due to lameness. Across the day, Schork and Taj Rai Hasan sat at 64th place at Gate 1 and 74th at Gate 2. From that point, the pair pushed forward, jumping 34 places to come into Gate 3 at 40th position, but they slid back a bit in the standings to land at 57th leaving Gate 4.

## The Winner

It was pouring rain as an anxious crowd waited in the stands for the first combination to cross the finish line. That turned out to be 34-year-old Spaniard Miguel Vila Ubach and the eight-year-old Arabian gelding Hungares, who put down a time of nine hours, 12 minutes and 27 seconds. They averaged a 10.8 mph ride (17.38 km/hour ride).

Ubach climbed in the rankings during the day, always leaving something in the tank, from Gate 1 (47th place) to the final check at Gate 5 (eighth place). The last leg of the course saw Ubach and Hungares steadily charge past seven other riders to bring Spain the first medal presented at the WEG. On the FEI world ranking of endurance riders, Ubach ranked at 86th entering the WEG.

After the race, Gold-medalist Ubach was elated and very pleased with how his mount handled the ride. "We feel very good, and I'm still dreaming of this moment," he said. "I'm very happy, and I think the recovery was excellent. We could ride again."

The Silver and Bronze medals were taken by a pair of riders from France—Virginie Atger and her horse Kangoo d'Aurabelle, and Elodie Le Labourier and her horse Sangho' Limousian, both Arabian geldings.

In the team standings, it was Team France to take the Gold medal with a combined rider time of 28 hours, 11 minutes and 27 seconds. The Silver medal was earned by Team Switzerland at 29 hours, 57 minutes and one second. Bronze was awarded to Team Portugal on a time of 30 hours, 38 minutes and 32 seconds. Team USA finished in 13th place on two rider times (since one of the official team members was eliminated) in 22 hours, 3 minutes and 53 seconds.

■ BRIAN SOSBY



Charles Mann



Jon Skjellsten

*Above: Team USA members Jennifer Neibus aboard Cheyenne XII and Joseph Mattingley aboard SA Laribou making their way through the very soggy conditions in Belgium.*

*Left: (l-r) Individual medalists France's Elodie Le Labourier (Bronze), Spain's Miguel Vila Ubach (Gold), and France's Virginie Atger (Silver).*