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Jumpers, Aerialists and Artists to the Hilt

By ROBIN FINN

Two hundred horses, artists all, and from all points of the globe, transformed midtown Manhattan into an international equestrian wonderland last night as the 115th National Horse Show got under way at Madison Square Garden.

There were German, French, Dutch and even Argentine-bred grand prix jumpers, the horse show world's version of aerialists, and there were five-gaited saddlebreds, homegrown in the United States.

The exhibitions featured the trick horses of the charro champion Jerry Diaz, who surrounds himself and his palomino with a spinning lariat, as well as a balletic dressage demonstration by the four-time United States Olympian Robert Dover and Anky van Grunsven of the Netherlands, whose bay horse, Bonfire, is the Michael Jordan of this sport.

Summoned to the show ring by the traditional call of the coaching horn, the horses, if not the spectators, arrived on time and immediately got down to business in a speed stake, the \$10,000 Etienne Aigner Horse-shoe Classic. The course required a dozen jumping efforts by its 18 competitors, including the teams from the United States, France and Canada, which sent its first all-female riding squad to the National and which will compete tonight in the Nations Cup.

For a time, three riders from the American team, led by the veteran Leslie Burr Howard, occupied the first three spots on the leader board last night. But when Patrice Delaveau and Aurnella, representing the French team, flashed through the course in 45.65 seconds without nicking a jump, the male rider on the 10-year-old French-bred mare moved into the first position and held it.

Howard, riding Jane Clark's French-bred mare, Ulane de Plessix, took second place with a brisk and unflawed 46.83-second trip round the course. Howard was a member of the United States equestrian squad that won a team gold medal at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics and a team silver in 1996 in Atlanta; this year she already has nine grand prix victories, and she is in such demand that she is commuting this week between the National and the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto. Third place went to the American



Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Frankie Chesler, at 17 the youngest rider to represent Canada in an international event, making her debut at the National Horse Show.

squad's Eric Hasbrouck on Miss Flo, the only Argentina-bred equine in the class; their clean ride was timed in 48.62 seconds.

The Garden and Canadian team debut of 17-year-old Frankie Chesler, the youngest rider ever to represent Canada, did not go as smoothly as the teen-ager had hoped. She came in last in the field on Virtual Village Elton III, with five knockdowns and a time of 118.09 seconds. Gail Greenough, the Canadian chef d'équipe, attributed Chesler's opening night woes to an overdose of adrenaline and an unruly horse.

"She'd never ridden the horse in competition before, and though I told her to slow things down in her mind when she visualized the course, once she got out there, she put it in fast forward," said Greenough. "But that can happen here on your first time out. It's New York, it's the Garden, it's impressive, and you want to go for broke."

Chesler, who was born in Miami but lives in Orangeville, Ontario, with her string of seven jumpers, earned her place on the Canadian team with a stellar 1998 campaign that has put her in third place in the World Cup standing among Canadian riders. Last year she won the individual and team silver at the North American Young Riders Championship with Braveheart, a black quar-

ter horse that survived a bout with cancer in 1996. Two weeks ago at the Washington International, Chesler finished second in the \$25,000 International Open Jumper class aboard Ravenna Z, her favorite horse.

"I want to have my own horse business, do the Olympics and win a gold medal, and next year I want to ride in the Pan American games, that's my biggest goal for now," said Chesler, who elected to represent Canada rather than the United States because she suspected, accurately as it turned out, that she had a better chance of making the Canadian team in a hurry.

"In the U.S., there are too many older riders just as good as or better than me who've been waiting for a spot on the team, so it wouldn't have been fair for them to pick me. And here I am already on the Canadian team. It's a big honor."

The dressage specialist van Grunsven, a three-time World Cup Final champion who won double silver at the Atlanta Olympics, waltzed through her musical ride on 15-year-old Bonfire.

"The truth is that Anky is the state of the art of our sport," said Dover, the United States dressage champion. "And Bonfire is the same way; he's so far advanced beyond most of the other animals. He just has this incredible desire to get it right."