



Hough wins Great American \$1 Million Grand Prix at HITS

Sunday

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By Fred Hiers

Less than half a second divided winner of the Great American \$1 Million Grand Prix Lauren Hough and runner up Aaron Vale at HITS Post Time Farm Sunday, the culmination of 10 weeks of events attracting international and Olympic medalist riders.

The Ocala event yesterday marked the fourth year for what has become Horse Shows in the Sun's Triple Crown, a series of three \$1 million grand prix competitions. The first was held last Sunday at Horse Shows in the Sun (HITS') in Thermal, California. The third is scheduled for Sept. 10 at the HITS event in Saugerties, New York.

Hough and her mare, 13-year-old OhLaLa, owned by The OhLaLa Group, finished ahead of 48 other show jumpers during the first of two rounds. Hough, based out of Wellington, then beat 13 riders, many of whom were some of the best riders in the world, in the second and final round.

Hough was the seventh rider in the group of 14 and finished the course without knocking down any part of the obstacles, finishing in 48.966 seconds. Her ride bumped Ben Maher aboard Don Vito from the lead and held the lead spot for the rest of the competition.

"I was not feeling confident because there were seven more behind me," she said after the Grand Prix. "But I rode the best I could."

"I went fast at (the end of the course), but I didn't take any risks," she said. "I rode, in my opinion, the fastest ride I could ride today."

There were about 3,500 spectators who came to watch the international event. During the first round, competitors were required to complete the 550-meter course in no more than 88 seconds. Riders were required to complete the 430-meter long, jump-off round in no more than 69 seconds.

The first round had 17 obstacles to jump. The best horse and riders to finish Round 1 then competed in Round 2, or the jump-off, made up of 10 fence obstacles as high as 5.25 feet.

The \$1 million in prize money was dispensed to the 20 best riders, with the first-place finisher getting \$350,000. Second place got \$200,000 and third \$120,000. The 20th place finisher received \$3,500.

Hough was also recently a member of Team USA in the FEI Nations Cup qualifier at Post Time Farm in February. She rode Cornet in that competition. The team finished second behind Team Ireland. In 1994,

she won the US Equestrian Federation Show Jumping Talent Search. She was also named Grand Prix Rookie of the Year by the US Pacific Coast Horseman's Association.

Hough said she will give OhLaLa two weeks off and then compete again in Miami and then again in Hamburg, Germany in May.

Given the mare's age, "I want to preserve her as best as I can."

The second place finisher Sunday was Aaron Vale aboard Finou 4. Vale is from Williston. Finou 4 is owned by the group Thinkslikeahorse and Don Stewart.

"I almost got exactly what I wanted. I got as good a round as I could have," Vale said. "I don't think I could have done more. We almost kept the money here at home, but hats off to Lauren."

Vale finished the course without knocking down any obstacles in 49.442 seconds.

Third place was Andre Thieme riding Conthendrix. Thieme, who is from Plau am See, Germany, owns Conthendrix.

"I knew her horse is fast and my horse is not the fastest," he said after the Grand Prix. "I did everything I could ...but if I got to go again I would do the same thing."

Thieme also thanked HITS founder and president Tom Struzzieri for hosting the event.

"It's a very good thing you do for the sport," he said. "America has been very good to me these last few years...and I thank you for that."

Thieme finished the course in 50.086 seconds and did not knock down any obstacles.

Among the dignitaries there was Ocala Mayor Kent Guinn.

"Being the Horse Capital of the World, this is one of the components of that, that makes the area unique," Guinn said of the Grand Prix.

"It's just a good, clean industry that's good for Ocala and Marion County," he said.

He said that in his position as mayor he tries to let as many people as possible know about the industry and events like this that can offer people enjoyable and relaxed entertainment.

Spectators agreed, shouting and applauding as horses and riders managed the courses flawlessly and moving higher in the rankings. Their eyes were glued and breaths held as each horse and rider managed each obstacle, appearing suspended before the 1,000-pound animal again landed on the sandy ground.

"I just love to watch these shows," said Lisa Pearl, 55. "I've seen a lot of grand prix all over the country."

People could watch the events on television, "but there's the excitement of being here," she said, sitting on her folding chair about 20 feet from the ring. "This way you have the best possible view."

She only wished more people would come and see these riders and horses competing on the highest level.

"I think there are so many other sports, so many other options," she said. "But we're having a great time."

Antoinette Green said coming to the event is a great way to spend an afternoon.

"And I love horses. That's why I'm out here," said Green, 59.

Sitting on a lawn chair and with two friends in tow, Green thinks the sport is growing in popularity.

"It's just getting started...and I'm having a fantastic time," she said.

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