

HICKSTEAD

THE SMALL HORSE WITH THE HUGE HEART

By Lulu Kyriacou, *England*

HICKSTEAD, BEST SHOW JUMPING HORSE IN THE WORLD, COLLAPSED AND DIED IN THE RING AT CSI-W VERONA, ITALY IN NOVEMBER. LIKE MILLIONS OF OTHERS, I HAD WATCHED THE 2008 OLYMPICS AND THE JUMPING WAS SPECTACULARLY EXCITING FROM START TO FINISH WITH THE INDIVIDUAL GOLD MEDAL GOING TO THEN NOT SO WELL KNOWN CANADIAN PAIR OF ERIC LAMAZE AND HICKSTEAD. A BRILLIANT RIDE IN THE JUMP OFF CLAIMED THE MEDAL AND CATAPULTED THEM INTO INTERNATIONAL STARDOM AND HICKSTEAD DID NOT LET HIS STAR FADE AS OFTEN FOLLOWS OLYMPIC GLORY. HE WAS AN EXCITING, POWER PACKED DYNAMO OF A HORSE THAT I CAME TO ALWAYS EXPECT THE SPECTACULAR FROM.

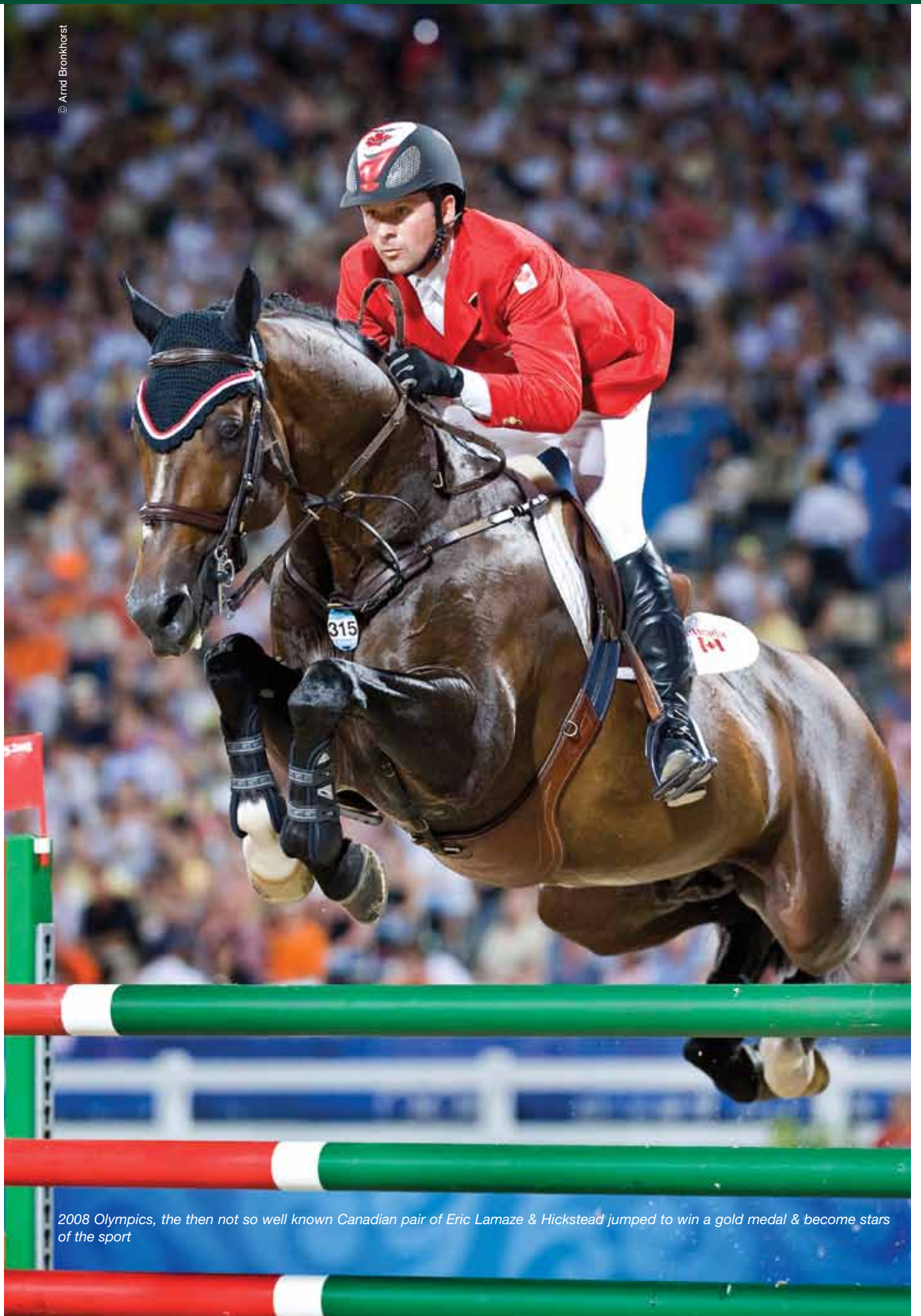
But my first personal encounter with the horse who was to become a legend was rather more low key. CSIO Lummen is the first Nations Cup show in Europe that also features a famous Derby course, but I was much more interested in seeing the Olympic Champions (who were based in Belgium) in person for the first time. After a winter season in Florida they were using the show as their first European international outdoor outing of the year.

After watching on the television, I suppose I was expecting a huge fiery creature, but a rather small dark bay went almost unnoticed in the warm up. Eric and the horse jumped a couple of low key

rounds that were decent but not spectacular at all and I remember wondering what all the fuss was about! The rest of that year Hickstead was solid in Grand Prix classes all over the world but perhaps the Games had taken a little bit out of him because it was not until Rio in August that I finally got to see what all the fuss was about for myself! Then, only the Italian Master of FASTER, Gianni Govonni prevented a Global Champions Tour Grand Prix win for the Canadian Number One and the fighting qualities which the horse became so renowned for were obvious to me; I was sure Hickstead grew about a hand as he entered the arena! No wonder he looked bigger on television, he

seemed to relish the crowd and the atmosphere.

But if 2009 had not been particularly special, 2010 left no-one in any doubt of who was the shining star of international show jumping. Wins at Valencia and La Baule were followed by the Queen's Cup in Calgary and the Grand Prix in Aachen before Hickstead went to the World Championships in Lexington Kentucky. There, despite his rider finishing only third due to faults on another horse in the Final Four contest, Hickstead, with three new riders as well as his usual one, did not touch a single pole in the ring and was crowned Best Horse. There could have



2008 Olympics, the then not so well known Canadian pair of Eric Lamaze & Hickstead jumped to win a gold medal & become stars of the sport



▲ Hickstead & devoted groom Delphine

been no worthier recipient. He cleared every fence by miles. By this time I knew Delphine, Eric's groom and the horse quite well and knew they were capable of anything. The horse, rider and groom were a complete team and I was awestruck by the way he jumped in Kentucky and by how much he clearly adored Eric. The ears would always prick and the head would come up as Eric approached to mount.

2011 began with a second place in the World Cup Final and then a series of stunning successes. One Grand Prix win after another. La Baule, Rome, another Queen's Cup and the CN Grand Prix, the world's richest class, all fell to the small bay horse with the huge heart. Eric reclaimed the World Number One spot and everyone was convinced a defence of their Olympic crown in 2012 was more than likely despite the horse being 15. After all, Rolf

-Goran Bengsston had just won the European Championships on Ninja la Silla who was exactly the same age.

But first the 2011 indoor season needed to be started, and 'Stix' as Hickstead was known at home, was aimed at Verona for his first indoor show. For me, working in the press room at the show, having the Olympic Champions on site was always a bonus and generated automatic media coverage. Delphine and her beloved charge passed the vet check without incident, aside from the horse being so well he had to trot twice as there was too much cantering, bucking and general good humour the first time for the vets to see the required trot steps. Then the pair conducted a television interview with the show director and stood like a lamb while the cameras were on him. He could not have seemed happier and no one had the slightest inkling of what was to come.

When the jumping started, Hickstead was taken quite steadily, as Eric knew he usually needed one or two indoor rounds to get used to the more confined spaces again. But the Grand Prix was a World Cup class as well, and they entered the ring looking as competitive as anyone. Sadly, they just touched the middle part of the combination which was fence five and Eric looked rueful when he circled and pulled up after clearing the rest of the 13 fence course. The pair walked within two feet of me and then turned across the arena towards the gate.

The next 30 seconds or so are well documented. I could not credit what was happening although from years of racing and eventing experience, I knew exactly what the end result would be. All horse lovers should know

that even the “real footage on the internet has been slightly slowed down. As the horse walked past me I took a picture of him, the time reading 15.30, and when I dropped the camera in horror (I was clicking away as he walked out) it was still 15.30. I do believe as Eric does, that the great horse’s last conscious thought was to go down slowly so Eric could get clear but the end was very swift, in the arena where he would always be a legend. Like many others at the show, I could not stop the tears from falling, the horses are not just animals to us, they are friends and companions and I could not imagine how Delphine and Eric must be feeling. The rider looked unable to comprehend what was happening in front of his eyes, absolutely dazed and not able to register, and his grief was still apparent days later at a press conference where his voice shook and broke when he talked about his “invincible horse” who had made his name and taken him to greatness.

For us, the public, press, organisers, riders and grooms, it was a moment of enormous tragedy. Not one person was unaffected. The riders decided within minutes that they were too shaken and distraught to continue and the organisers completely supported the request to abandon the class. Tributes poured in to press rooms all over the world, there are few jumping horses whose death would make headline news in the New York Times for example, but Hickstead transcended boundaries throughout his whole career. There have been other great horses: Shutterfly, Milton, Big Ben, and Deister, but Hickstead’s name will live on in legend among those other superstars. A true horse of a lifetime, whose loss was felt by all. 🐾



▲ Hickstead feeling good at Verona vet check. He was born on Hickstead March 2, 1996 was owned by Torrey Pines and Ashland Stables Inc. A Dutch Warmblood, Hickstead was 16 hands high and bay in colour. He was born in the Netherlands (bred by Jan van Schijndel in Maren-Kessel) in 1996, by HAMLET. During his career, he won more than \$3 million Canadian dollars