

VIVE LA FRANCE! FRENCH CLAIM FURUSIYYA FEI NATIONS CUP TITLE IN BARCELONA

By Celeste Wilkins, England

IN 2012, THE SAUDI EQUESTRIAN FUND ANNOUNCED A SPONSORSHIP DEAL THAT WOULD REVOLUTIONISE THE NATIONS CUP SERIES. UNDER THE NAME FURUSIYYA, AN ARABIC WORD MEANING 'HORSEMANSHIP' OR MORE PROPERLY 'CHIVALRY', THEY PLEDGED 16 MILLION EUROS OVER FOUR YEARS. AS PART OF THE DEAL, THE NEW FURUSIYYA FEI NATIONS CUP FEATURES A NEW SET OF RULES DESIGNED TO GLOBALISE THE SERIES. MANY IN THE INDUSTRY BELIEVE THAT GLOBALISATION OF THE SHOW JUMPING CIRCUIT IS THE WAY FORWARD.



Saudi team rider HH Prince Faisal Al Shalan is a strong supporter of his national federation's role in the Nations Cup revitalisation, "When I think about the sport three – four years ago, it's definitely different... the whole industry is really booming and the only way to sustain such an industry is to globalise."

The series certainly has the potential to bring show jumping to the mainstream sporting audience. Throughout the year, Furusiyya has become synonymous with some of the most exciting show jumping seen to date, from the first qualifier in Al Ain to the gripping Final in Barcelona. Forty-one nations competed at 21 qualifiers around the globe to vie for 18 spots in the Barcelona final. One of the most radical changes brought by the new format involved the abolition of the previous league system and allocation of nations into one of six regions. Nations competed within their region, scoring points at qualifying Nations Cup competitions. A pre-defined number of nations from each region would go through to the final, eliminating the stronghold of top European show jumping nations in the final of old.

The Nations Cup series was marked by unexpected twists and turns that kept the competition exciting for spectators. St. Gallen marked a turn of events that would drastically affect the leaderboard for the rest of the season. Strong rains left the arena waterlogged and the German team elected to withdraw, even though they risked elimination from the series. As they acted in the interest of their horse's welfare, they were reinstated but they lost a crucial opportunity to gain points. Wins at Hickstead and Rotterdam and a third place finish at Aachen were not enough to pull them through to the Final. This would be the first time in recent history that the German team would be excluded from a Nations Cup Final competition and proved that in the Furusiyya FEI Nations Cup format, anything is possible.

The Final in Barcelona had all the elements of a world-class championship event. Plenty of spectators lined the stands of the immaculate Real Club de Polo, giving



Eric Lamaze

the venue a distinct Spanish party atmosphere. Behind the scenes, the riders and their connections were able to relax in the immaculate clubhouse, enjoying tapas and fine wines. Riders exercised their horses on the large all-weather track around the perimeter of the lush polo pitch. The competition arena itself was nothing short of beautiful. The new all-weather arena, installed especially for the competition, was flanked by a beautiful stand that resembled a palace, the Furusiyya VIP hospitality marquee, and two massive grandstands for spectators.

The courses designed by Spain's

Santiago Ullastres Varelas were hailed as 'true championship courses'. They tested the riders' precision and horses' scope through massive jumping efforts, technical striding and tight time allowed. While there were very few clear rounds over the course of the weekend, no combinations walked out of the ring with injuries or lost confidence. The difficulty of these courses was highlighted by a special prize fund of 200,000 Euros to be split between riders who could achieve a clear round in Friday's preliminary qualification round and the Final on Sunday. In the end, only two riders were able to accomplish that



Aymeric de Ponnat

feat, Canada's Eric Lamaze riding Powerplay and Britain's Scott Brash riding Ursula VIII. It was a special moment for Lamaze, "I am always happy for the horse. I think they deliver incredible performances for us and I'm happy to be back...To me it's one of the happiest days..."

The format of the Final was distinctly different from previous years. Only eight teams would advance to the 1,500,000 Euro penultimate Final on Sunday based on their placing in a preliminary qualification class on the first Friday of the competition. The ten remaining teams would compete for a massive prize fund of 300,000 Euros.

Qualification for Sunday's Final did not come easy. The top eight placings were undecided until the final rider, Lamaze, crossed the finish. Brazil took the win, despite elimination of Eduardo Menezes following his dismount from Calavada. He left the arena on his feet, but put the pressure on his teammates to produce clear rounds. They did, finishing on a single time fault from Marlon Modolo Zanotelli and Clouwini. The biggest upset of the competition came when the United States, tipped to win the series by many, were bumped out of the eight top placings and thereby excluded from the Final. Uncharacteristic rails dropped for

McLain Ward on Rothchild, Reed Kessler on Cylana and Lucy Davis on Baron leaving them on a score of nine faults, tied with Ukraine and Canada. Canada's Eric Lamaze sealed their fate with a clear round on Powerplay. In the event of a tie in the preliminary round, the combined time of the counting scores would determine the placings and Lamaze's round was just fast enough to put Canada in 7th place and Ukraine in the 8th and final qualification place.

The preliminary competition was also disappointing for the Saudi and Qatari teams. A spate of difficult rounds racked up many faults for the two nations, relegating them to the Consolation Competition. Kamal Bahamdan reflected on the result, "Today was a tough day and we need to make a comeback." His 17 fault round with Noblesse De Tess was atypical of the usually strong pair.

The dismal finish didn't tarnish the Saudi team's winning attitude, with many nations bringing their 'A' team; they knew it would be an uphill battle. HH Prince Faisal Al Shalan said, "We're used to it. It's a bit harder when it's two rounds, this way you feel like you're in a championship. The ring is a little bit tight for my horse; in a big ring he jumps better. At the beginning of the round I had a nice round, but then at the end I took two wrong decisions."

The Consolation Competition provided an opportunity for teams to make a comeback after the Friday qualifier. The course was no less of a challenge, producing only eight clears. The Saudi team certainly fulfilled their promise of a comeback, ending on six faults with a guaranteed third place after a fluid clear round from Ramzy Al Duhami and Al Capone, a single time fault from HRH Prince Abdullah bin Miteb and Davos and five faults for HH Prince Faisal Al Shalan and Talan. Kamal Bahamdan and Noblesse de Tess encountered problems in the difficult triple combination, finishing on 12 faults.

While the Saudi team were safely on the podium, there was a dramatic tussle between the Swiss and American teams for the top two



HRH Prince Abdullah bin Miteb

placings. Following a four fault round from Pius Schwizer, an American victory looked assured. A clear round from Beezie Madden and Simon would win the class. Simon, a horse known for his super consistent clear rounds at the international level, shocked the crowd when he slammed on the brakes at fence six. After the competition Madden explained her mount's error, "I think he made a big effort at the vertical before and he was a touch behind me on the run but it was the last thing I expected. It rattled him for sure", said Madden of her unexpected refusal with Simon.

The round tied the Swiss and American teams, forcing a jump-off. In the new Furusiyya format, three riders would form the team for a jump-off, against the clock, over a shortened course. Simon showed memories of the first round when he hesitated for a fraction of a second at the same corner where he had previously refused but went clear for the American team. The rounds came fast and furious. The Swiss, despite having a top line up of riders, failed to gain a clear. A 10 fault round from Lucy Davis and Barron meant that McLain Ward couldn't have any more

than four faults.

"I'm not sure how to explain it," Lucy said, "and it wasn't what I was planning or hoping for! I certainly didn't want to put the pressure on McLain like that." McLain handled the pressure, riding Rothchild to only two time faults and hoisting the American team to the top of the podium. A bittersweet victory, summed up by Chef d'Equipe Robert Ridland, "We got the short end of the stick, but even so it was a great competition!" After the two thrilling days of Furusiyya competition, the expectations were high for the Sunday Final. The course was massive and included the signature of the Varelas designed courses -- a demanding triple combination that fell for 11 riders. It was France's Aymeric de Ponnat and Armitages Boy who broke the spell and delivered the first of only four clear rounds in the competition.

As in the previous rounds, the anchor riders decided the podium places, with France, Brazil and Ireland in contention as the fourth riders entered the ring. Penelope Leprevost for France retired when Nayana kicked the top rail of the

first fence as her score would not alter France's chances of victory. Ireland dropped out of the running for top honours when Billy Twomey and Tinka's Serenade faulted at the precarious plank vertical at fence six. Alvaro De Miranda held the Brazilian hopes, but a less than perfect stride to the double at fence 8 knocked their chances. The French team hoisted the Furusiyya trophy atop the podium, finishing on a score of eight faults and winning a share of the colossal 1.5 million Euros prize money.

The inaugural season of the Furusiyya FEI Nations Cup has been a success. HH Prince Faisal, the main proponent behind Furusiyya commented, "Everyone is very enthused about [the Furusiyya series] and we hope it will grow and grow." With the excitement that played out in Barcelona, there is no doubt that next year's Nations Cup series will attract the top of the sport and provide even more opportunities for international growth. HH Prince Faisal summed up what the show jumping community is thinking



Team Brazil



Winners of the Consolation Competition, Team USA



Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Saudi Equestrian Fund HH Prince Faisal bin Abdullah presenting the French team with their trophy



HH Prince Faisal bin Abdullah presenting FEI President HRH Princess Haya Al Hussein with a trophy

following this successful event, "The organisation of the show did a great job to make this show one of the most attractive shows in the world. I would really like to be here again. The first season of the new

structure of Nations Cup was really spectacular from the very tough qualifications to the Final. That is what the international equestrian community needs; to spread our sport over the whole world."

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