

Report

Olympics: Equestrian Three-day Event

Words and photographs by Caroline Sussex

The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing have drawn to a close and were enjoyed by many hundreds of thousands of people around the world. Caroline Sussex, a lifelong Arabian horse breeder, was lucky enough to attend the three-day event in Hong Kong and while not solely about the Arabian horse, we are delighted to include first-hand coverage of this Olympic event in this issue of *The Arabian Magazine*.

Congratulations to Hong Kong for their amazing organisation of all the equestrian events at the Beijing Olympics 2008. The main venue for dressage and show-jumping was at Sha Tin Racecourse and the cross-country took place at the picturesque Fanling Golf Course and Bees River Equestrian Centre. It was amazing that while the cross-country just took around three and a half hours to complete, the golf course had been out of action for nearly two years!

The organisation was immaculate and no private vehicles were allowed to go near the venues. All transport was by bus from the various stations or other specific meeting points. We were advised to arrive two hours prior to the event to ensure we had time to get through the security points without queuing, but this was not really essential.

I was lucky to join my husband in Hong Kong for the three-day event part of the Games. On the Friday, a small number of people, including ourselves, were issued tickets to walk the cross-country course, giving us a taste of how everything would work on the actual day. The course was different to the galloping stretches of Badminton and Burghley that we are used to seeing, but there were some rises and hills and after walking the whole course, we found it to be tricky and demanding and we thought it would catch a few people out as there were many small narrow jumps in combination fences.

The competition started on Saturday 9 August with two dressage sessions, one starting at 6.30am, the other at 7.15pm, arranged to avoid the heat of the middle part of the day. I arrived around 8am in time to see the Lucinda Fredericks on her mare Headley Britannia by the great equestrian sire, Jumbo. Her test was outstanding and she scored the full 10 marks for one counter canter. It was clear that her result would not only put her in the lead, but was unlikely to be beaten by later riders.

Of the 70 horses entered, it is interesting to note that 18 were of Irish sport horse breeding including Call Again Cavalier (Mary King), Parkmore Ed (William Fox-Pitt), Connaught (Philip Dutton, USA), Tankers Town (Sharon Hunt), Irish Jester (Megan Jones, Australia), McKinlaigh (Gina Miles, USA), Spring Along (Daisy Dick) and Ben Along Time (Clayton Fredericks, Australia).

Six Anglo Arabs were entered including two for the French team. These were Rock Model (Vittoria Panizzon, Italy), 17th, Pandora (Katrin Norling, Sweden), 19th, Escudeiro (Jeferson Moreira, Brazil), Chico (Hua Tian, China), Coronado Prior (Eric Vigeanel, France) and Haston D'Elpegere (Jean Renaud Adde, France). Unfortunately, it was not to be a great Olympics for the Anglos with the French team sadly losing two horses to accidents at the venue.

William Fox-Pitt seemed to be having problems with Parkmore Ed, which you will have read about in *Horse and Hound*, but when he came into the arena he was very spooky at the pagodas at the far end, which is where the judges were seated. This put him on edge and sadly the first few set of marks were very low. Although William seemed to manage to get the horse to settle a little, it was too late and he came out with a penalty score of 50.2. In the evening performance, our spirits were raised considerably by a wonderful round from Kristina Cook on Miners Frolic, who although also spooking at the pagodas, Kristina managed to calm the horse before doing her brilliant dressage of 40.2 penalties.

We did not have tickets for the Sunday dressage session with the good scores from Sharon Hunt (43.5) and of course, the amazing performance once again by Mary King (38.1).

Next day was the cross-country. A time of eight minutes was allowed for this course, which proved impossible to make. The fences were superb. Every one a Chinese theme, but the crouching dragons were spectacular and of most interest to the children! The weather was fortunately at its coolest on the Monday with rain, which definitely meant that the temperature was kinder to the horses. The event started at 8am and finished by 11.30am. I do not think the time allowance meant that horses were pushed too much, although I understand some were tired

at the finish which could have accounted for some of the run outs at the very tricky pagoda fence 28 at the end. One of the biggest fences was fence number nine, the Yu Garden with a brush and big drop and very tight to jump the narrow brushes immediately below. Many horses ran out at the lower part, but we saw the British team fly through this and on down to the second water after jumping the birdcages (10) and chopsticks (11).

The course certainly made the horses and riders work and think hard and it was not easy with fences coming very quickly after each other. It was good to see that the cross-country played a part in the scoring and while the competition was going on, it was difficult to see who was going to come out on top until the last rounds took place as the leaders seemed to make mistakes. The time also meant every competitor had time faults. The excitement rose towards the end with loud cheers and a big crowd gathered below the large screen at fence nine. Mary King soared over this fence, cheered on by the Brits in the crowd and waving of flags. The French then took over the main spot at this fence, but the frustration was obvious among their supporters as their rider fell at one of the earlier fences and was therefore eliminated.

The second water jump, Big Leap to Success at fences 12 and 13, posed many interesting questions and various different ways of jumping this fence were taken. Mary King took the shortest route, saving a tiny bit of time here.

I have never attended a competition supporting Great Britain, but by the Tuesday evening, the atmosphere in the Sha Tin Arena was electric. The team event was close, with gold and silver positions held by Germany and Australia and Britain in bronze. It was unlikely that Britain could move up, but the top two could have changed. As usual, people from around the world had flown in for the event and the party atmosphere was evident. As you will know, Tina Cook rode a superb clear round to ensure the bronze medal for the British team and now it was time to cheer. The Germans were immaculate and unstoppable and the Australians hung on to silver. If all our riders had gone clear, Britain might have pushed for silver, but they were too many points behind and so having fences down did not help the catch up required.

After the first show-jumping round was complete, it was 9.30pm. The team was cheered on and then the top 25 horses and riders from each country were waiting for the second show-jumping course to be assembled. Time to get a quick snack and congratulate the other countries for their win! Then back to the real crunch as eight horses were all within one fence of each other including Tina Cook and Miners Frolic. Jumping in reverse order, every rider from place eight had to go clear to have a chance of a medal; one fence down and the chance had gone. The atmosphere was electric, it was 10.30pm, still baking hot – the hottest evening so far; could Tina Cook go clear?

The auditorium was quiet and Tina set off, an immaculate double clear round, the stadium erupted with British flags everywhere and now the pressure was really on for the next six riders. As each horse came in, there was a groan from the appropriate country when a pole rolled and each one down meant that Tina moved up a place! Then Gina Miles on McKinlaigh from the USA came in and went clear guaranteeing her a bronze, so Tina was 4th. What would Megan Lewis of Australia do? Just at the end, she rolled a pole which fell, her team mates crest fallen, but it meant that Team GB had a bronze medal with Gina Miles moving up to silver, well done Tina Cook! Now for the wonderful grey stallion Marius ridden by Hinrich Romeike. This truly special and kind horse took the German round and although one pole jumped out of its sockets and just rested back, it was clear and the gold medal was deservedly won.

At midnight the medal ceremonies took place, the atmosphere like a big party with everyone cheering their teams. The two ceremonies were very special and something always to remember. I was lucky to be there and experience all this which finished at 1.40am.

I hope that this is not the last three-day event at the Olympics as suggested by Princess Haya in this week's *Horse and Hound*. It was a truly great competition and Hong Kong deserve all the credit they have got for making it a memorable, brilliantly organised and happy event.