

Stella Buckingham Wins the Top Prize in The American Tradition of Excellence Equitation Challenge.

Over seventy junior and amateur entries took to The Oaks International Grand Prix Field for the inaugural American Tradition of Excellence Equitation Challenge, presented by Whitethorne. Moving up from eighth to first, twelve-year-old Stella Buckingham earned an impressive win aboard Nom de Guerre.



The inaugural class took place over three phases, with Day One featuring the jumping phase over a 3'3" Hunter Derby type track plus an educational presentation and Q&A phase with all riders, trainers, and judges that evening. Day Two all competitors with a score of 60 or better returned for the second round, followed by a work-off of the top six scoring riders.

Georgy Maskrey-Segesman, owner and operator of Whitethorne, a premier hunter-jumper sales barn, created the class with the goal of providing more education for equitation riders on the West Coast. "I'm looking for it to be something that's enjoyable and educational and something that people can walk away from and say, 'Wow, that was a great experience. I want to do it again.'"

The courses in the challenge were designed by Karen Healey. She also served as technical delegate and was on hand as a mentor to all participants, along with mental skills coach Tonya Johnston. Honorable judges Bernie Traurig and Stacia Madden presided over each jumping phase and provided written comments for each competitor alongside the open numerical scoring format.

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After a mandatory riders' meeting and subsequent warm-up round in the morning, Phase One officially began on Tuesday afternoon when 71 competitors set out to tackle the expansive course, which asked questions of adjustability, pace, and fluidity around bending lines and tight rollbacks.

Katie Browne, who rides with Elvenstar, sat second after Phase One. "My goal for the entire course was staying on pace," she said. "Jump number one was a big hay wall covered in ivy, and I knew I had to get my gallop and set my pace from there." Her plan paid off as she navigated the trickier elements of the course and earned a score of 84. Katherine Dash, a student of Brookway Stables, led the pack after the first round with a score of 85.

Phase Two was conducted at The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna Niguel, that evening. Riders and trainers attended a video presentation of "Equitation - An American Tradition of Excellence," which included slow motion videos of five winning rounds from recent years of the Maclay Finals. Traurig commented on how they handled each portion of the course, i.e., using combination of direct and indirect rein aids to keep a horse straight to the trot fence, or influencing the landing to land on certain lead, or choosing to land then swap to counter canter, to show off skills.

Afterward, Tonya Johnston gave a "Mental Skills" presentation and then Traurig, Madden, Healey, Johnston, and Maskrey-Segesman answered inquiries from the riders. The unusual opportunity to receive such extensive feedback from the panel highlighted the educational components of the class and gave riders numerous options for improvement in the third phase the following morning as well as a new perspective on equitation.

Phase Three commenced at 8am on Wednesday morning. All riders with a score of 60 or better from Phase One were invited back, bringing the entry total for the second day to 61. The course for the day's competition took center stage, featuring a prominent square of hay bales interspersed with jumps 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, and 10. The rest of the fences in the twelve-element course were incorporated in a series of carefully measured lines, a delicate scoop-fence bounce, and a daring hand gallop finish to the final oxer.

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