

The AIG \$1 Million is a fitting finale for the HITS Thermal circuit.

article and photos by Kim F. Miller



My bleacher mates for the AIG \$1 Million Grand Prix were a couple, Linda and John, from Oregon. They winter in the desert and although they aren't horse people, a friend who is recommended the Thermal Grand Prix a few years back and they've made it a staple of their annual vacation. Linda and John were familiar with Rich Fellers, Richard Spooner, Jill Henselwood and a few other top contenders and their oohs, aahs and enthusiasm for each of the class' 43 rounds were a refreshing reminder that show jumping really does have the chills and thrills needed to make it a mainstream spectator sport.

The March 15 competition marked another year of big crowds, packed several deep around the entire Grand Prix ring. From the cheap seats in the sun, to coveted shade staked out several hours in advance and packed VIP buildings, it was a terrific day of sport and a fitting final  for an eight-week circuit that's thriving.

In the five-way jump off, five-time Olympian Jaime Azcarraga of Mexico and Anton Radio Formula were just a shade faster than American Olympian McLain Ward and Rothchild. Afterward, McLain said he hadn't minded going first in the jump-off, and planned a "not crazy" course plan with his "naturally fast" horse. It was a plan, he said, that "wins eight out of 10 times," but resulted in second this time.

Jaime went home with \$350,000 for his day's work, and McLain left for the second of three HITS Triple Crown classes, in Ocala, FL., \$200,000 richer. Third place went to the fun-to-watch

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Charlie Jayne, another East Coaster. His plan to omit a few steps on his big-strided Chill RZ didn't pan out in the jump-off, but they were clear for the \$120,000 third prize. San Diego-based Brazilian rider Eduardo Menezes and Quintol were nearly three seconds under the winning time, but at the cost of a rail that left them in fourth. California's lone final-rounder, the World Cup Finals-bound Susan Artes and Zamiro, also had a rail to take fifth place.

Linda, John and I put \$5 each on Meredith Michaels-Beerbaum, Richard Spooner and Will Simpson, respectively. All put in exhilarating rounds, but failed to make the jump-off. We re-upped to McLain Ward, Charlie Jayne and Susan Artes, respectively, with John winning the \$15 pot. The betting added fun to an already exciting, surprise-filled competition.

Personal highlights included seeing one of the circuit's winningest riders, Richard Spooner back at Thermal after being based in France for several years, watching Will Simpson and Rich Fellers do anything on their horses and seeing so many East Coast and a few foreign riders first-hand. It's all just a teaser for the World Cup Finals in Las Vegas this month, and interesting to hear many riders compliment HITS for staging Thermal and other competitions that let them compete and prepare against the best without leaving North America.

Although faults were pretty evenly spread throughout the big, colorful course built, for the second consecutive year, by Brazilian course designer Marina Azevedo, the last fence in the first round was a heartbreaker for many. San Diego-based French rider Eric Navet laid down an equitation lesson in a round that was clear until this skinny vertical with sail standards. Candace King and Kismet 50 lost their jump-off berth at the same fence and young American star Lucy Davis was clean, too, only to suffer a shocking refusal there by Curtis 72.

It's hard to believe that it's been nine years since HITS moved this hunter/jumper series to Thermal, from a few miles away in Indio, and it's thriving. Stall counts were back to a 2007 peak of 3,500, for the biggest week, #VI, and the schedule was back to eight weeks for the first time since 2009, reports HITS CEO Tom Struzzieri.

As a result of the restructuring of the FEI World Cup League, Thermal will host just one World Cup qualifier next year, but management has other excitement up its sleeve. The AIG \$1 Million Class will become an FEI 5* event, which should attract even more international riders, American and foreign. HITS has also applied for 5* status for the Grand Prix at the National Sunshine Series in early November. Also new is an offer to create custom barns for clients who want to stay between the fall shows and the Desert Circuit, which starts in early January. They

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may not get many takers initially, but it sets the stage for clients to build even more of their fall and winter schedule around the increasingly attractive Thermal venue.

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