

Team U.S.A. Wins International Reining Celebrity Challenge

World-class show jumpers and dressage riders showed their skills competing in western tack.

Will Simpson, pictured here on Carlsson Vom Dach, was the highest-scoring non-reiner and earned the second highest score overall. Photo courtesy FEI. The show was on in Las Vegas last weekend as the world's top FEI dressage and show jumping riders took to the arena in an entertaining competition featuring the sport of reining. The Rolex FEI World Cup played host to the International Reining Celebrity Challenge at the Thomas & Mack Arena. After early mornings and late nights of practicing sliding stops, rollbacks, spins and lead changes, six of the world's top equestrians stepped up to the challenge in the FEI discipline of reining. By the time the competitors were finished, Team U.S.A. had won the event with a score of 413.5. Least important to all competitors was the score. They all repeated how much they enjoyed their time on the back of a reining horse.

"The horses were unbelievable," Olympic Gold Medalist Will Simpson said. "I'm ready to go back to the barn right now to see if there is anything left to ride."

First in the arena was Rodrigo Pessoa from Brazil and American Quarter Horse Sir Pine By Boomer. The Olympic Gold Medalist in jumping marked a 118.5 after nearly bringing the crowd to its feet with his final sliding stop. Pessoa, who rolled into the barn area only minutes prior to the competition, learned his reining pattern en route to the Thomas & Mack Arena. Watch a video of his ride here.

Following Pessoa, U.S.A.'s Will Simpson, fresh off a Gold Medal win in Beijing in show jumping, kicked the energy level up several notches marking the second-highest score in the competition with a 144.5. Simpson was aboard the American Quarter Horse Arapaho Sailor.

"I learned a little bit on my own," Simpson joked following the celebrity challenge. "Then I had three lessons to unlearn what I had taught myself and learn it correctly."

Next up was international team member Anky Van Grunsven and Dun Its Chico, World Champion American Quarter Horse in reining. Van Grunsven, the most decorated athlete in the competition, marked a 141.5. She was followed by fellow dressage competitor Charlotte Bredahl-Baker representing the U.S.A. Bredahl-Baker, who jumped out of her spins early but kept her cool aboard Reeboks Rerun, commented that being part of the celebrity challenge was the most fun she's had in a long time.

Ann Fonck, the defending NRHA Open World Champion rode in next aboard Whizle Fritz and marked the high score of 147. Fonck had a nearly perfect run, and with her signature grin and dimples, had the full support of the crowd. Fonck's score gave the International Team a score of 407, putting pressure on the final competitor, NRHA President Rick Weaver, who needed to mark at least a 137.5 to put Team U.S.A. on top.

Weaver jogged into the arena aboard the American Quarter Horse Dun Its Manhattan and immediately put the crowd on notice by raising his hands and signaling that he intended for Team U.S.A. to take home the International Celebrity Reining Challenge title. Weaver's exhilarating pattern had the crowd cheering from start to finish and earned him a 144, placing Team U.S.A. solidly on top.

"This whole experience has been amazing," Weaver said. "The quality of the horses and horsemen here were unbelievable. We all share the love of the horse."

The National Reining Horse Association (www.nrha.com) and the American Quarter Horse Association (www.aqha.com) are co-sponsors of the International Reining Celebrity Challenge. Incorporated in 1966, the National Reining Horse Association is the governing body of the sport of Reining. NRHA, with their International Headquarters in Oklahoma City, is responsible for promoting the sport of reining and working to ensure the highest standards of competition. The American Quarter Horse Association, founded in 1940, is the largest-single breed equine registry in the world with more than 330,000 members worldwide. Pending AQHA Executive Committee approval later this month, dressage will become the newest event in AQHA competition.

Video: Watch Rodrigo Pessoa reining.