

Kemmer Throws Down the German Gauntlet

Germany continues its Olympic equestrian dominance through day one of dressage Grand Prix competition.

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Germany's Heike Kemmer and Bonaparte threw down the gauntlet when producing a superb test to take the individual lead after the first session of the Dressage Team Grand Prix at Sha Tin on Wednesday night. And her dominant performance suggests that her nation's team record at Olympic Games - gold at every edition since 1964 except for Munich in 1972 - is unlikely to be broken in Hong Kong in 2008.

The Netherlands sent two riders in the arena but neither could better Kemmer's score of 72.250, and the second Dutch rider, Imke Schellekens-Bartels, said with some resignation in her voice after completing her test with Sunrise, "I'm afraid the team gold medal is already decided, we wanted to beat the Germans but today we see that this is going to be a very tough job. It's over - we will be lucky to get a medal at all now I am afraid."

INFLUENTIAL

Her negativity however was not shared by Great Britain's Emma Hindle who produced a sparkling ride with Lancelot to slot into second place individually on a mark of 71.125. Hindle believes the new format which allows for only three team-members per nation and no drop score could prove influential. "If one horse from any team makes a big mistake then it is going to be wide open," she insisted after producing the best performance of her career.

With the Dutch drawn first to go, it was Hans Peter Minderhoud who had the discomfort of being pathfinder in the arena and he produced a lovely fluid test with his 13-year old mare Nadine to opening the scoring with a mark of 69.625. "The trot was good and the passage was very good but I made a mistake in the canter when I did seven strides instead of six," he admitted. He was happy that his mare was relaxed in the ring - "before I went in she was a little tense but in the ring she was totally fine, she did not seem to be aware of either the video screen or the cameras," he pointed out.

Brazil's Luiza Almeida had a night to remember, the 16-year old rider going into the equestrian history records as the youngest rider ever to compete in the equestrian events at an Olympic Games. And with her Lusitano stallion Samba she earned a mark of 60.833 which would leave her in 18th position as tonight's first session drew to a close.

DISAPPOINTED

Britain's Jane Gregory was disappointed with her test with Lucky Star. The 48-year old rider, whose husband hails from Hong Kong, has only recently re-emerged at the top level of international dressage thanks to the talent of her 16-year old gelding and tonight earned a mark of 63.375. "The test was definitely not my best. The horse didn't make any glaring mistakes but he made some minor ones," she said. And she was concerned about how this would affect the British team - "the other riders will have to get their best score ever to pull me out of the mud!"

Hindle obliged by doing just that but there is now a lot of pressure on the final British partnership of Laura Bechtolsheimer and Mistral Hojris who will compete in the second session on Thursday night.

America's Courtney King looked cool and elegant throughout her eye-pleasing test with Mythilus to register a score of 70.458 which slotted her into fourth place and she was happy with her result. Mythilus had not been well since arriving in Hong Kong but by today he had bounced back to himself. "He has had some down days since he got here, but today I couldn't have asked for more," she said. She admitted that she can sometimes be nervous in world-class company - "I have ridden in two World Cup finals and you hear names like Kyra and Anky and you wonder what you are doing here but now I am at the Olympic Games with them and I'm hoping I can perform well" - which is exactly what she did.

GOOD FEELING

Imke Schellekens-Bartels test with Sunrise was light and elevated and registered a score of 70.875. "I had a good feeling" she said afterwards, "but I think my horse was not enjoying the heat because she was not as strong as normal. She was coming back behind the bit and then she got her tongue over - but I could still ride her through the canter half-pass. Then her tongue came right again but it cost me too many points. I had no big mistakes except when she had the tongue over the bit - the pirouettes felt really good, although she could maybe have been stronger in passage," the rider added.

Emma Hindle's score of 71.125 came at the end of a lovely ride with Lancet and she was bursting with pride to be representing Great Britain at these Olympic Games. "This has been a wonderful month getting to know the people on the British team and the Olympic experience has been very special" she said. "When I am riding on a team I always like to do a "clear round" in my test and I'm very satisfied with the way it went today," she added. She explained that Lancet competed at the last Olympic Games in Athens with Imke Schellekens-Bartels and that this is her second time to be part of an Olympic side. "I was in Athens with another horse but it was an absolute disaster for me!" she pointed out, delighted however that things had gone much better for her this time around. "I ride the best test I can ride on any single day and today this was the best I could have done" she said, adding that she already has her sights set on next year's European Championships which take place at Windsor (GBR) - "then the FEI World Equestrian Games in Kentucky and its all about building up a good team for the London Olympics in 2012," she said.

IN THE DRIVING SEAT

First however the Beijing Olympic Games medals must be decided and Heike Kemmer has ensured that, even though only one German rider has competed so far, they are already in the driving seat.

From the moment she entered the ring tonight she and her handsome 15-year old gelding Bonaparte took command.

"He was always wanting to go forward," she said, "and that really helped him to produce good flying changes". Asked how difficult it was to be first German into the arena she replied, "I'm used to it - they often send me in first because they know I have strong nerves," and when asked if she had intended to push her horse for the best test she could find she said with considerable conviction - "that's why we are here - we are here to go for it!".

She knows Bonaparte so well that, from the moment he first halted, she felt a good test was on the way. "If Bonnie takes a deep breath after the halt and then lets it out again I know it is going to be good. I just have to wait for him to breathe out and then we go!" and the only thing she believed she might have done better was "he could have gone with more pressure in the half-pass, but he had a super-relaxed walk".

For now she sits at the head of the individual leaderboard, content in the knowledge that she has given her team the best possible start. But the second session on Thursday night will bring some major changes to the leaderboard on which Hindle currently lies second ahead of Schellekens-Bartels in third and King in fourth ahead of Minderhoud.

And Finland's Kyra Kyrklund, Germany's Isabel Werth and Nadine Capellman, America's Debbie McDonald and Steffen Peters and The Netherlands' Anky van Grunsven have still to take their turn.

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