

WORLD EQUESTRIAN GAMES ENDURANCE IN AACHEN
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Spain find gold in Germany!

Pamela Burton



Photo: © Pamela Burton.

THE RELENTLESS RAIN MAY have soaked the countryside, but it didn't dampen the spirits of the crowd that had gathered in the Aachen event stadium to give a noisy welcome to Spain's Miguel Vila Ubach as he galloped in for his gold medal win on the eight year old Arabian gelding, Hungares.

An estimated 20,000 spectators cheered as Ubach completed the 160km course in an average ride time of 9 hours 12 mins 27 seconds, crossing the finish line in a torrential downpour. Ubach's win was a surprise ending to day that saw the leaderboard change frequently with Belgium, Australia and the UAE all taking a turn at the head of the pack.

The 33 year old Ubach was 46th coming into the first vet gate and gained ground on each loop, heading out onto the last 13km in eighth position, as the off and on rain became a downpour. "The most difficult was the weather but the hills were not a problem", Ubach said after his win. "I knew my horse could fly over the last bit. We rode out of the vet gate and I saw the French girls and decided to follow them as I was sure they would get good placings. The horse felt so strong that we found ourselves quite up front. Then I felt we could make it and decided to just go for it."



Photo: © Pamela Burton.

- ◀ France victorious.
- ▶ Miguel Vila Ubach, a happy winner.
- ▼ A happy mascot!

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Photo: © Pamela Burton.

Eight minutes later, 22 year old Virginie Atger, 22 rode the eight year old gelding, Kangoo D'Aurabelle, into silver medal position, becoming the first of the French powerhouse team riders to finish. "We started slowly from behind, all together as a team. We made our way forward as a team and it has paid off", she said. Team member, Elodie Le Labourier, also 22, was next over the line, to claim the bronze medal on her 16 year old gelding, Sangho Limousian. "He was wonderful today", she said of her mount. "I am going to retire him after this and I am very happy that he finishes his competition career on such a fabulous win."

Ubach turned and kissed his horse and there were tears all round as the rain continued to fall. "I knew we were good but I don't believe I'm here today", the happy winner declared at the press conference that followed his victory. "I was European Champion in 1999 and I've been dreaming of another title ever since, but I'd never have thought it would be this one."

A total of 148 riders from 41 countries vetted in to start the ride that comprised a series of six loops over three adjacent countries, with the start and end in Germany. The out vet gate was located at Vaals, the highest peak in the Netherlands. From there the trail looped back and forth through Belgium and the Netherlands with the fifth loop returning to the venue site in Aachen, where riders made the final circuit of 13km. At the end of the ride, 54 horses vetted through giving the ride a 37 per cent completion rate. Ian Williams, FEI Director of Endurance, commented that this rate was not to be thought exceptional as the vets eliminated many horses before small problems became larger ones. "Remember that the sport of endurance has by far the greatest degree of control by the vet panel that is there. The vets are proactive not reactive. Many of those horses that were

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withdrawn from the competition were done so to eliminate any possible situation from arising. Some of the horses might have just stood on a stone and that might be enough to create an imbalance in their gait. The welfare of the horse is paramount at all times.”

Best Condition was judged the day following the ride, and six horses showed how truly fit they were as their handlers trotted them out for a seated stadium crowd. In a style reminiscent of a beauty pageant, the horses were dismissed one by one, until it was announced that Pascal Dietsch, the reserve who replaced French veteran rider, Cecile Miletto, had ridden the horse judged ‘most fit to continue’, the 11 year old mare, Hifrane du Barthas.

The French scooped the team gold with their entire team of four placing in the top eight. All four horses were presented for Best Condition. The silver team medal went to the Swiss who were in their element on this ride finishing in 19th, 20th and 21st position. The Portuguese took team bronze, finishing in sixth, 12th and 41st. The win was particularly sweet as it was the first medal-win ever by the Portuguese at any World Equestrian Games.

The French have shown remarkable team success in recent years, having won the team gold three times, at the 1990 WEG in Stockholm, in 1994 in the Netherlands, and in 2002 at the WEG in Jerez de la Frontera. French Chef d’Equipe, Jean-Louis Leclerc, has built on the selection and training model set up by the late Pierre Cazes, and now has a new team of talented riders. The 2006 WEG Team included three riders in their twenties, who are part of the upcoming cadre of 14 young riders that are qualifying through the French system to compete at the FEI level. “They are young but experienced”, said Leclerc, commenting on the day’s ride plan he said, “The horses have been working



Photo: © Pamela Burron.

- ▲ Ubach on the trail.
- ▲▲ Precision in the quadrille display.

well together before the competition for ten-12 days. We were expecting a difficult course so we rode out together and planned to go carefully and slowly in the beginning and pick up the speed later.”

Nine teams finished with the necessary three riders and nine teams came in with two riders each. Unfortunately, this latter number included the Italian team that took the gold in the Dubai 2004 World Championships as well as the American team. Valerie Kanavy, US Chef d’Equipe, commented, “We planned to ride the first part of the ride very conservatively until about half way and see how things stood and pick up the pace from there. We had all five riders in until the fourth vet check when Joe Mattingly’s horse slipped in the mud. In the fifth check, Christophe Schork was spun. That was a shock. The horse is a choppy mover, and the vets called him lame. That was a surprise and threw everyone. Our other three riders did very well and the horses look great.”

The Belgian team suffered as well with just one rider finishing. The UAE, while defending their 2002 Individual World title achieved in Jerez de la Frontera, had set their sights on team gold - an honour they have yet to win in a World Championship - but Emirati hopes were dashed at the second vet check when the pack leaders were eliminated; HE Sheikh Ahmed bin Mohammed Al Maktoum riding the nine year old, Jazyk, due to metabolic, and HE Sheikh Rashid bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, riding ten year old Keroual du Breuil, eliminated on a soundness issue.



Photo: © Pamela Burron.

- ▲ Tears of delight all round.
- ▼ Haflingers paraded at the opening ceremony.



Photo: © Pamela Burron.

World equestrian games



- ▲ Immaculate precision from the German State Studs.
- ▼ HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum awaits his sons' arrival in the vet gate.



The opening ceremony for the games held on August 20th was a worthy tribute to the role of the horse in the lives of the people who live, work with, and love them. The two-hour long event showcased the amazing discipline of the German State Studs with a 64-stallion quadrille, the historical pageantry of the horse in German history with costumes, carriages and carts, and a dynamic example of each discipline showed off by competing team members.

A crowd-pleasing highlight was the opening address, delivered by FEI President, HRH Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein, wife of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai. "The World Equestrian Games is like no other championships in the horse world", said Princess Haya. "Here we bring together all of our disciplines. All the disciplines are different, but we are united across disciplines and nations by our respect for the human athlete but ultimately it is the horse that brings us together. The horse, which has no understanding of borders, political differences, class or languages, cements us in the simple common bond of friendship and unity. I ask you to broaden that bond by opening your hearts and minds to the stars of as many disciplines and nations as possible."

Halvard Sommerseth, the Chairman of the FEI Veterinarian Committee acknowledged the advance of endurance in the world of horse competition. "Thanks to countries like the UAE, endurance has registered tremendous growth over the last decade", he said. "The goal to make it an Olympic sport is still our main focus and we continue to work towards it."

RESULTS

INDIVIDUAL

1. Miguel Vila Ubach (ESP) / Hungares - 9:12:27
2. Virginie Atger (FRA) / Kangoo d'Aurabelle - 9:16:13
3. Elodie Le Labourier (FRA) / Sangho'Limousian - 9:16:14
4. Jaume Puntí Dachs (ESP) / Elvis HB - 9:22:07
5. Philippe Benoit (FRA) / Akim du Bouleve - 9:24:30
6. Joao Raposo (POR) / Sultao - 9:24:31
7. Valerie Ceunik (BEL) / Kouros des Iviers - 9:27:39
8. Pascale Dietsch (FRA) / Hifrane du Barthas - 9:30:44
9. Shk Duaij bin Salman Al Khalifa (BRN) / Shar Ruskin - 9:34
10. Urs Wenger/(SWI)/Zialka - 9:38:56

TEAM

1. France - total riding time 28:11:27
2. Switzerland - 29:57:20
3. Portugal - 30:38:32

Full results can be seen on the World Equestrian Games website: www.achen2006.de



- ▲ "Let the games begin!"
- ▼ The opening ceremony enthralled the crowd.

