

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

If you had suggested a Dutch team gold and Valegro being chased by Desperados with a 3.5 point margin to his gold a week or two before the European Championships in Aachen— it would have been cause for giggles and laughs in the stable isle. But that is exactly how it played out. Orange is the new gold and Valegro is still king, but the question is, for how long?

TEAM SUSPENSE

This year the top nations Germany, Great Britain and The Netherlands could take a little more relaxed stance; they had their Rio Olympic qualification in the bag already. There were several nations that needed to land a team placing ranged 4th to 6th to make it to South America. It would turn out to be harder than expected, strong dressage nations like Denmark need to qualify riders individually as they finished 8th. Instead the Rio-tickets would be delivered to Spain, Sweden and France leaving Russia, Austria and Belgium to join Denmark with individual qualifications.

SURPRISE SURPRISE

The Dutch team effort seriously paid off. The team's chef d'equipe Wim Ernes had declared ahead of the Championship that he and his riders would be happy and satisfied with a bronze. An unusually modest goal for the Oranjen, but it had been a troublesome way up to the D-day with injured horses. What actually made it for the Dutch team were solid deliveries from all four riders, up to par of their normal level. Patrick van der Meer and Uzzo came in as 4th rider on the team at a quite late stage but managed a good score despite some errors. The young gun Diederik van Silfhout with 10-year-old Arlando N.O.P. is an incredible future prospect. They made their championship debut last year, when Wim Ernes was all out of options, stating that it was too early for them. Diederik and Arlando made him proud then and even more so this year. Arlando shows quite amazing tight rhythmic pirouettes and very nice piaffe. Their score of 75,814% was a bit on the conservative side but placed them in the lead individually as well as top team after day 1.

IN THE ZONE

Hans-Peter Minderhoud has developed the sire Glock's Johnson



Photos: Hippo/Foto/Dirk Caremans

Charlotte Dujardin and Valegro continued their unprecedented reign with double gold in the Grand Prix Special and the Freestyle, but the rest of the pack is closing in.

tremendously since the WEG; a bit of restricted breeding duty has done wonders for the hind leg activity. Together they managed to score a new personal best with 77.586% in a championship with scoring in the same low department as the Hong Kong Olympics. The last team rider for the Orange team was Edward Gal and Glock's Undercover, a horse somewhere between genius and madman, extremely talented and sensitive. Their Grand Prix test is perhaps the best they have ever done in public. Undercover was relaxed, in the zone with Edward and showed off his on the spot piaffe and elevated passage. The neck was not as short as it can be when the horse gets too tense and the mouth nice and softly closed around the curb bit. "Undercover liked being in the main stadium, de seven judges boxes made him even more secure", said Gal, a happy team gold medal winner. Gal was pleased and proud over the progress Undercover has

made to calm down but acknowledged that the team prize giving had been perhaps too much of a challenge. "I have my doubts about the Special now, I could feel how afraid he was during the prize giving, it usually takes more than a day to make him calm again once he gets too agitated," explained Gal. He did not know exactly how spot on he was in his analysis.

SILVER LINING

They did not manage to grab gold, yet you could not trace much disappointment in the four Brits Carl Hester, Charlotte Dujardin, Michael Eilberg and comeback queen Fiona Bigwood. "We remember where we come from – from the bottom of the league, we still remember how it feels like to not come close to the podium," explained the team's mental anchor and trainer Carl Hester. He has still gone home from championships more times without a medal than with. For Charlotte Dujardin it is the

opposite, she has never left a championship without a medal, starting her career at the EC in Rotterdam in 2011. The weakest link in the British team would turn out to be Eilberg on Marakov, a surprising choice as his top horse Half Moon Delphi was sold just a few months before Aachen. That did not really matter, as Fiona Bigwood and Atterupgaards Orthilia proved more able than expected. Fiona rode with an eye-patch due to a riding injury a few months back that damaged her vision, hopefully not permanently. They made a smashing debut together although Fiona has ridden a handful of championships on other horses. The mare is a true gem for Britain and will be loads better by the time the plane to Rio is boarding. Atterupgaards Orthilia is to Britain what Bella Rose means to Germany and Deja to Sweden. It would be Carl Hester and Nip Tuck that did not quite meet up to the high expectations with a little tension and a few errors. Charlotte Dujardin and Valegro almost cost the audience a spilled drink and a slight hiccup when they missed their one-tempi changes. Apart from that it was a 'Blueberry' in a superbly athletic shape, no extra pounds, constantly positive pointy ears and a mere pleasure to watch. They scored 83,029% and gave the British team a three percent margin down to Germany.

DEFLATED TO BRONZE

Before Aachen the German team were favourites for gold, no other team felt they had a line-up to match Unee BB, Don Johnson FRH, Totilas and Desperados. The victory was a given, except that it never is when it comes to equestrian sport. The team rookie Jessica von Bredow-Werndl did a lovely test with Unee BB, just a slight mistake in the tempis. It was not their best score but as the scoring was set to save-mode it was ok, the German team were rumbling a bit. Team anchor Isabell Werth was over the moon after her ride with Don Johnson FRH – until the scores hit the board, it was lower than Unee BB and Jessica. Now the German team started to look worried. As happy as everyone had been to have Matthias Rath and Totilas on the team, the German team management was equally devastated after the black stallion showed unevenness in the trot extensions. Scores dropped,

FACTS

Ground Jury in Aachen: Susanne Baarup, Katrina Wuest, Annette Fransén-Iacobaeus, Eduard de Wolff van Westerrode, Jean-Michel Roudier, Anne Gribbons, Andrew Ralph Gardner. In the Grand Prix, a Ukrainian combination was **eliminated** due to blood on the horse's leg. **Two riders** competed individually, Judy Reynolds for Ireland and Dina Ellermann, Estonia. In the Special, Norwegian rider Trude Hestengen with Tobajo Pik Disney took Totilas' **vacant spot**. Patrik Kittel and Deja choose to **abort their test** when Deja put her tongue over the bit, and Edward Gal and Glock's Undercover **were eliminated** in the Special as Undercover bit his lip. Due to late withdrawals from Anna Kasprzak and Fiona Bigwood only **thirteen combinations started** in the Freestyle.

rumours flew around Aachen and the entire globe, Matthias Rath opted out of the Special and Totilas was officially retired. The low score put pressure on Kristina Bröring-Sprehe and Desperados. "I do my best, Desperados too, we did as much as we could and I feel very proud about our performance," said the young rider that took a bronze medal at the WEG. She scored 79,743% and that gave Germany a bronze medal.

SPECIAL WITH SPRINKLERS ON AND OFF

After what must have been the most eventful resting day on a championship ever, the Special was on with unsteady weather. For some riders it was literally pouring down, others had the luxury to compete dry. That did not hinder most combinations to perform bigger, better, bolder and braver. The Special was a top-notch class and it did not even make the main stadium half full, 'only' 17,000 spectators. There was plenty of action in this start field. Norwegian Trude Hestengen and Tobajo Pik Disney were first out and made the most of their extra chance, they got the vacant start slot from Totilas' withdrawal. Her horse got tangled in the white fence and took a chunk with him into the ring; still they managed to climb up in the ranking. Sweden had managed their Olympic qualification with a 5th place but the hope for a bronze was shattered early on. Not by team rookie Emilie Nyneröd and Miata, CDI4* winner on Mallorca this summer, they managed to get to the Special and made the most of their start, taking plenty of risks, ending up as 22nd. Spain took 4th place and their best rider Beatriz Ferrer-Salat and Delgado were delivering better and better scores, 5th individually in the Grand Prix and 4th in the Special. Carl Hester and Nip Tuck bounced back delivering a stellar ride on a personal best with 77,003%, earning 5th place. The drama started with Patrik Kittel retiring with his mare Deja after a

series of disturbances in relation to the piaffe. "She put her tongue above the bit, Deja has a super soft mouth and reacted, I felt that the best I could do was to throw in the gloves," said a devastated Kittel.

BECAUSE OF MISFORTUNE

His fellow Swedish team mate Tinne Vilhelmson Silfvén performed very well with a soft Don Auriello, although a mistake in the tempis crept in they took 6th place. The saddest moment came when Edward Gal entered on an extremely tense Glock's Undercover, not being able to halt at all. The performance improved with every movement and by the time they came to walk it looked a bit less tense. Still, the mouth foam on Undercover became red and head judge Andrew Gardner made the call and rang the bell. "It was just in front of me, very visible and I had no other choice," said Gardner afterwards, as the blood rule is extremely clear. Not one drop of blood on the horse during competition. That put Gal's partner Hans-Peter Minderhoud with Glock's Johnson in bronze place with 79.034%, maybe he

was the most tuned-down medallist of all times. "I am happy but I wish I did not sit here because of Edward's misfortune, it does not feel good," said Minderhoud. But he had every right to celebrate a lovely ride, a worthy bronze winner behind the two ladies that were about to make headlines. Kristina Bröring-Sprehe and Desperados were almost 2,5% behind Valegro and Charlotte Dujardin, still a very happy silver medallist. "Last year I took bronze, then I was shocked, now I am so pleased with Desperados, he really fights for me, could not be happier, could not wish for more today," said the ever so nice German star.

FREESTYLE – A CLOSE SHAVE

It was not jam-packed but very close with 38,000 dressage enthusiasts on the stands when it was time for the dressage dance to music. Only 13 were on the line-up and Spanish rider Morgan Barbançon made the most emotional ride with her stallion Painted Black as it was their last show together and the black was retired from competition. Fellow team mate Beatriz Ferrer-Salat was on fire in her dance with Delgado to suggestive drums, a very sensual beat. "We travelled to Aachen with the aim of qualifying the team for Rio, which we succeeded in doing. Then, in the Special, I wanted to qualify for the Freestyle. That worked too. But the fact that I am taking a medal home with me, is simply incredible," she said after grabbing bronze after scoring a personal best of 82,714%. Delgado, she said, "was constantly injured. I missed the World

Equestrian Games in Kentucky and London because he was injured. I kept having to rest him." Now she has a concept that works and they will be dancing in Rio to just as Beatriz was on her way to do after the EC, celebrating in the discos of Ibiza.

WANTED: ONE-TEMPI CHANGES

The battle of the titans was a match between Kristina Bröring-Sprehe and Charlotte Dujardin. Kristina had a flawless ride with Desperados that scored through the roof on the artistic marks, landing her on 88.804%. Dujardin and Valegro started out with picture perfect quality in all movements with one exception – the one tempis had a small hiccup. When she tried another line and failed again, a small hiccup – not a totally destroyed series, the audience were on the verge of cardiac arrest. But this left the German-dominated audience into thinking that their home rider had won. When Dujardin's score came up it was loud booing in the stadium and it continued. Nevertheless, the difference between the two was 3.5 points and no one had ever come so close to beating the king of dressage Valegro. "I have more to give, we will improve, I know we can do more," said the otherwise very shy Kristina Bröring-Sprehe about her future chances for gold. "I will have sorted out my one-tempis in due time for Rio," said Charlotte Dujardin, a real good sport with complete understanding for a disappointed home crowd. "Kristina gets the same support I had in London, it is only natural, I do not take offense," said the Champion. ■



The all-male Dutch team took a surprise victory in the team competition: Diederik van Silfhout, Patrick van der Meer, Edward Gal, Hans Peter Minderhoud and Chef d'Equipe Wim Ernes.