

The Chronicle of the Horse

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Hansen Records 98th Grand Prix Victory At Memorial Day Classic by Marnye Langer

For the 98th time in his long and illustrious career, Hap Hansen led the victory gallop, this time aboard Horalas, for the \$25,000 Memorial Day Classic Grand Prix, May 29. The sell-out crowd at the Los Angeles Equestrian Center in Burbank, Calif., stood and cheered in acknowledgment of Hansen's accomplishment.

For Hansen, the win came at one of his favorite places. "I really like the grass field at the Memorial Day Classic, and there is a great crowd," he said. "They are so enthusiastic, and it creates a great atmosphere. It makes you really want to try."

Both Mark Watring and Guy Thomas had posted fast jump-off rounds before Hansen. "I didn't think I could catch Mark," Hansen admitted. "He was fast." When asked how he and Horalas surpassed Watring and Sapphire's time of 40.05 seconds, Hansen explained, "Mark's horse is more lofty, and he spends a nickle's worth more time in the air." Hansen seemed to match Watring turn for turn, but Horalas skimmed over the jumps to stop the clock in the winning time of 39.24 seconds. "He is very brave and has a huge heart," said Hansen of Diane Rushing's bay gelding. With the exception of last year, Hansen has been partnered with the horse since 2003.

Watring finished a close second behind Hansen and was especially pleased since he qualified both his horses for the jump-off. "Sapphire was super today," said Watring of the gray gelding. "He has won so much for me that he owes me nothing. Anything he does is wonderful." With Sapphire, Watring, who lives in California but was born in Puerto Rico, earned the individual gold medal at the 2003 Pan American Games on behalf of Puerto Rico. Although Sapphire was quick around the jump-off track, Watring noted that there was one way to make the gelding even faster. "He goes ballistic in the victory gallop. If we did that first and then jumped off the results would probably be different," he said with a laugh.

Watring also qualified his up-and-coming grand prix mount, Brilliant, for the tie-breaking round. "He is 9 going on 6 and is coming along great. He jumps so big that sometimes I need to tone him down," he said. Watring moves the horse up and down the levels to give him the experience and confidence he needs. "In today's jump-off we got a little deep," explained Watring of the rail Brilliant had at the second-to-last fence.

Thomas was happy with his third-placed finish aboard Carlos. "My mom and dad bought him on the last day of Indio [Desert Circuit (Calif.)]," explained Thomas of the 9-year-old gelding. Thomas' parents, Butch and Lu, rode at the highest levels of competition, with Butch representing his native New Zealand and Lu representing the United States. Both have willingly stayed on the ground while Guy has assumed riding duties. With a number of consistent grand prix finishes the past few years, there is no doubt Thomas will soon find himself in the winner's circle, and he hopes it will be with Carlos. "I am extremely lucky to have him," explained Thomas, who is used to developing horses and then having to sell them. "Carlos is a pet to be around and a real character in the barn. He is super talented in the ring." This was the pair's first grand prix together. "He met all my expectations," said Thomas. "He jumped awesome in the first round and was super all week. I thought I was quick enough [in the jump-off], but I don't know him well enough to really turn him on." Thomas hopes to make a bid for the New Zealand Olympic team in 2008 with Carlos.

Scott Starnes designed an encouraging yet challenging course for the twenty-horse field. "I thought Scott did a really good job," commented Hansen. "The course wasn't huge, but he set enough traps like the distance question from fence 4 to 5AB. You could do five or six strides to the verticals [combination] set short. The fence after the water was a steady eight [strides], and that proved to be a problem for some riders."

For Hansen his 98th win was just as important as his first win, and he takes none of them for granted. Asked where he will make it to 100, Hansen just laughed. "A lot of people have asked me to win my 100th at their show!"