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*Winter Horse Trials: Saturday Report
Thieriot-Stutes, Billys, Burnell & Hill lead after cross-country.*



(Frankie Thieriot-Stutes & Chatwin PC: Sherry Stewart)

Feb. 29, Paso Robles, California: Today being Leap Day, there was some leapin' going on, over Hugh Lochore's upper level cross-country courses and in the standings.

Frankie Thieriot-Stutes and Chatwin overtook the top spot in Advanced. Although the previous dressage leader, Mai Baum, is perfectly fine, Tamie Smith opted to end the Pan Am Games team gold medalist's weekend after their 18.4 dressage test. Smith remains in hot pursuit of the win with Ruth Bley's En Vogue. The top nine of the 12 remaining Advanced pairs jumped clean, but incurred significant time faults in this early season outing. En Vogue was the exception with just 1.6 in this column. Helen Bouscaren and Ebay moved up into third, adding

12 time penalties to their dressage score for a 35.6. The leaders have a 27.8, followed by Smith and En Vogue's 30.

Having the lead is second to having Chatwin back to his old self, says Thieriot-Stutes. After finishing fourth at the Luhmühlen 5* in Germany last June, Chatwin was sidelined most of the rest of the year with severe health issues stemming from a case of enteritis. For a long stretch, his survival was all the rider and the Chatwin Group cared about. Thieriot-Stutes was "not going for broke," but there were moments when her partner of six years seemed to be on today's course. All of it indicating Chatwin has put the problem behind him. "Just being here is spectacular," said Thieriot-Stutes. The pair is on the US Developing Rider Training List and has Land Rover Kentucky in their sights if all proceeds as hoped.

Megan Sykes and Kaylawna Smith-Cook celebrated their first Advanced level completion today. They are sixth and eighth, aboard Classic's Mojah and Passepartout, respectively.



(Lauren Billys & Castle Larchfield Purdy. PC: Sherry Stewart)

Billys Leads Intermediate

At Intermediate, overnight leader, junior rider Jordan Crabo, had a fall on course. She's fine, but out of the running. Lauren Billys and Castle Larchfield Purdy got their Olympic year off to a great start in taking the lead. With their qualification to represent Puerto Rico in Tokyo already assured, Billys was able focus on a general goal of "being a faster and more efficient rider and preparing myself and my horses to be more forward." That was no problem for Purdy, who crossed the finish line with just a .4 time penalty, for a 28.2 going into show jumping.

"It's an interesting season because it's a slow burn to get all the way to Tokyo," Billys explained. "I ran Purdy here at Intermediate to see where he is in terms of fitness and to focus on things I need to improve. Today was a good indicator that he is feeling well and is happy to do his job."

A sliver of time penalties knocked Eneya Jenkins and Lawtown Boy out of their lead: they stand in second just .2 penalties behind. Intermediate's third-ranked pair is Billys again with her "pocket rocket," Can Be Sweet. At "maybe" 16 hands, "He's very different from Purdy, but he's turning out to be very suited for the upper levels."

Preliminary



(Lauren Burnell, left, and Bec Braitling. PC: Kim F Miller)

There were few changes in the standings at Preliminary's Open and JR/YR divisions. Amateur Lauren Burnell and Freedom Hill were double clear to hold the lead on their dressage score in the Open division. Their coach, professional Bec Braitling, and Kirschblute 3, had just 1.2 time faults to stand second and James Alliston and Calero were double clear for third. Less than three penalties separate the top three.

Burnell credited the lead completely to her horse. "He is calm and just loves his job," she said. "On cross-country, he goes fast and stares for the flags. I just love him!" Burnell and Arnell Sporthorses are based at Twin Rivers Ranch, but Freedom Hill isn't one of those horses who

needs a special routine to get tuned up for competition in his own backyard. "Wherever he is, it's a show."



(Bruce Hill & Bossinova. PC: Kim F Miller)

Bruce Hill and Bossinova's double clear cross-country moved them from second to first in the Prelim Jr/YR standings, while Haley Turner and Shadow Inspector's modest time faults lost them the overnight lead. Kathryn Canario and Kiltubrid Rhapsody held their third spot, while this division, too, is tightly bunched. No room for a rail from anyone in the top three over Jose Nava's show jumping route if they want to win on Sunday.

Fresh from a third-place finish at the CCI2*-Short at Fresno County Horse Park, the partnership of 15-year-old Hill and Bossinova is still quite new. It's been smooth sailing, including today over the new cross-country track. "They did a great job redesigning the course," said Hill. "It's straight forward and fun, but nothing super hard or scary."

Comments about the courses' suitability were echoed by riders at several levels. All expressed excitement about further changes that will be revealed for April's Spring International, featuring the inaugural CCI4*-Long division. Today's tracks were praised as appropriate for the start of the season.

Derek and Bea di Grazia are fourth and fifth at Intermediate, with Ringwood Justice and Ringwood Isabelle, respectively. Land Rover Kentucky and Olympic course designer Derek di Grazia said: "It was a nice galloping course: a good confidence builder for the horse's next

event." For riders, Bea di Grazia added: "It was good for rusty people to learn to gallop at something and there was nothing too tricky. It was a great opportunity to practice getting your eye back."

The Twin Rivers Ranch season is presented by Professional's Choice and Auburn Labs. The Riding Warehouse and Best Western PLUS Black Oak are supporting sponsors.

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