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## World Cup Jumping—It's Complicated But Works

by: Linda Allen

It's time for the Rolex FEI World Cup Final in Las Vegas! The system for qualifying is complex—and the format for the competition takes a little time to assimilate—yet this competition has the longest history (with perhaps the least tinkering of the rules) of any of the myriad of FEI Championship events held annually.

Max E. Ammann of Switzerland is the visionary behind the World Cup. He believed that the sport was so strong year-round that it was time for an indoor championship to cap off the winter season.

Europe, we must remember, has always had two distinct seasons for the sport: the summer where everything is outdoors and the winter where virtually every prestigious event takes place in an indoor venue. Professional riders in Europe must hone their skills under these two very different sets of conditions.

Max not only created his new event, and the qualifying criteria for participation in the Final, but he also knew that to make it a truly world-class event in the eyes of the sponsors, the media and the spectators he needed to include the best riders from every part of the globe.

Today World Cup qualifying events are held within 15 different geographical Leagues and Sub-Leagues.

This one competition has done immeasurable good in introducing the FEI level of competition to parts of the world otherwise isolated by distance and thus facing the uphill struggle to create top level jumping sport.

Competitors from Japan, the Arab countries, Eastern Europe, New Zealand and Australia all have the opportunity to put their sights on the highest level of the sport, while their Federations and officials gain knowledge and experience far beyond what they have with national events alone. We all owe Max E. Ammann a debt of gratitude.

Although the original sponsor, Volvo, ended the longest-running sport and sponsor partnership our show jumping has ever known in 1999, the World Cup has continued to put out top sport each year. Drawing approximately 40 competitors, including many of the best in the world, it always provides a great opportunity to watch super horses and talented riders.

### Getting There

The Thomas & Mack Center in Las Vegas has been home for the World Cup Finals on alternating years since 2000. Though they began with just the jumping final, the week now includes the show jumping and the dressage Finals making it an incredible opportunity for anyone interested in equestrian sport at its best.

For spectators it's a matter of buying a ticket and getting to Las Vegas; for the riders a great deal of planning, good riding and luck is involved.

Qualifying is no given, even for the best since only the previous year's winner is given an automatic bye. Everyone else contests a series of qualifying events during the season of their home league. Each league has its own starting and ending dates and number of events. Riders may contest all of them, as well as events in other Leagues (provided they don't try for points in more than the total number prescribed for their league, but the points from only half of the events will count.)

Invitations go to a pre-determined number of riders from each League; 18 from Western Europe, seven from the East Coast of the United States, and three from the West Coast, for example.

Wild card invitations are also given to provide a measure of mystery—two for the home country and one to the FEI. And, should one or more riders from a league choose not to travel, there are rules as to how far down the League list it's permissible to go to get substitutes. This means that little is absolutely certain until horses and riders are actually at the venue!

## **Perfect Preparation**

Conditions in the various Leagues vary tremendously. The calendar for each of the 15 different Leagues and Sub-Leagues is determined, according to local conditions, by the Federations within the area with the approval of the World Cup Committee of the FEI.

Western Europe has 13 qualifiers not beginning until October 10 and extending until March 22. Every event is held in a different indoor venue—larger and smaller arenas with lots of atmosphere in all of them. To contest them all a rider would have to travel as far as Finland, England, Italy, Spain and Leipzig, Germany. In fact, the 13 qualifiers take place in 11 different countries!

In contrast, our own Eastern League consists of 11 events and begins in late August. Some events are outdoors and some indoors. Meanwhile the Western League also has 11 events right now (at six different venues), but all of them are held in indoors.

Canada, in contrast, has a season beginning the end of May and ending the middle of November. This often makes it difficult for riders doing well in the winter and spring not to be left out. In fact, should the Olympic gold medalist, Eric Lamaze, wish to contest the Final he would have to hope he might achieve that sole FEI wild card slot since he sits in sixth place on Canada's list—the World Cup was not his priority this past year!

The number of riders issued invitations isn't arbitrary but is roughly based on the participation in the qualifiers. This season Western Europe had 153 riders participate with 86 collecting points. Our Eastern League had 69 riders with 47 gaining points, while the Western League had 52 riders and 37 of them were on the board with some points.

Even without the traveling involved it would be unfair to ask a single horse to contest every event within the League, along with the other competitions that are not hosts to qualifiers. Riders must be effective managers as well as tough riders to get in. The need to plan the right break time for each horse to assure soundness and freshness is key. Arrival at the final with a burned-out horse isn't likely to achieve much.

As with any championship, one wants to arrive with a horse just reaching his peak to withstand the difficult three days of jumping ahead. In fact this year's Final will test this to an even greater extent than before. Rule changes now call for a final day consisting of two rounds containing an equal number of obstacles—previously the second (and different) round was shortened.

One thing is for sure, though, it's never easy for those dedicated individuals in our Federation to tabulate the results and then keep tabs on whose horses are fit for the trip and which substitutes must be standing in the wings.

*Noted international course designer Linda Allen created the show jumping courses for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and the 1992 FEI World Cup Finals. She's a licensed judge, technical delegate and a former international show jumper. She lives in Fillmore, Calif., and San Juan Cosalá, Jalisco, Mexico, and founded the International Jumper Futurity and the Young Jumper Championships. Allen began writing Between Rounds columns in 2001.*