

Jumping Verona

2023

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MAHER AND DALLAS ARE THE SHOW-STEALERS IN VERONA

Great Britain's **Ben Maher** and Dallas Vegas Batilly snatched a sensational victory in the fourth leg of the **Longines FEI Jumping World Cup™** 2023/2024 Western European League series in **Verona**, Italy today.

In the eight-horse second-round jump-off it seemed reigning European champion **Steve Guerdat** from Switzerland had it in the bag after scorching around the twisting new course to set a truly tight target time in 37.60 seconds with Venard de Cerisy. But reigning Olympic champion Maher snatched it from his grasp when, second-last to go, he was 0.15 seconds quicker with his exciting 10-year-old mare.

Italian course designer Uliano Vezzani set them a tough task. *"It was a very difficult jump-off, you had to ride the right lines to make it smooth and fast and Dallas gave everything to me today, she was really fighting for me and everything went my way - she was incredible!"*, Maher said.



Ben Maher e Dallas Vegas Batilly - ph. JV/S.Grasso

Atmosphere

The atmosphere at Jumping Verona is always electric, and that puts plenty of extra pressure on both horses and riders. The action takes place within the context of the world's biggest horse fair, the **Fieracavalli** which this year celebrated its **125th anniversary** and which attracted over 130,000 visitors from 60 countries around the globe. The Jumping hall was packed to capacity as always today, seating booked out within days of going on sale each year, and the sound level was at the maximum as the competition came to a thrilling climax.

Austria's Max Kuhner was first out against the clock and set the pace with a great clear round from the nine-year-old gelding EIC Julius Caesar in 39.76 seconds, and then Belgium's **Nicola Philippaerts** raised the game when crossing the timers in 39.00 seconds with Katanga van het Dingshof.

Next in however, Guerdat set a whole new standard when bringing his 14-year-old gelding home in 37.60, landing and turning to the next fence without ever taking his foot off the accelerator.

Norway's Johan-Sebastian Gulliksen (Harwich VDL), Sweden's Peder Fredricson (Hansson WL) and the sole Italian contender and former national champion Franca Ciriesi (Cape Coral) followed with foot-perfect runs, but none threatened the Swiss star's lead until Maher set off with absolute conviction to bring his mare home just 0.15 seconds quicker. And when last man in, Guerdat's compatriot Martin Fuchs had a fence down with Conner Jei it was a done deal. Maher would take the win ahead of Guerdat in second while Philippaerts slotted into third ahead of Sweden's Fredricson in fourth place.



From left: Maurice Caillaud (Foreign Judge), Matteo Sovera (Brand Manager Longines Italia), Federico Bricolo (Veronafiore President), Maurizio Danese (Veronafiore CEO), Marco Di Paola (FISE President), Riccardo Boricchi (Jumping Verona Show Director) - ph. JV/S.Grasso

Wall of sound

Maher was concerned that the wall of sound in the arena and the nearby warm-up ring might un-nerve his talented horse ahead of the jump-off.

"So I stayed in the quieter warm-up because she's very sensitive. I warmed up early so I could get to watch Steve, and I picked the right one to watch!", he said. *"My horse - a little bit like Steve's - she lands, she turns, and everything went my way today but it was so very close!",* he added.

Guerdat, who suffered a shoulder injury during the first round but said it didn't affect his second-round performance in any way, was upbeat about his second-place finish.

"I had a very good jump off. Everything went as I planned and there is not much I could have done better day. I was not fast enough and I am happy to be second today. Ben rode a great jump-off and fully deserves his win!", he said.

He continued, *"I have had a very good year with a very good Nations Cup season and then won the European title which was the goal for my team this year. It has been an amazing year, but I was struggling a bit with 5* Grand Prix classes. I did win a lot of 3 and 4* Grand Prix but was not so good with the 5*, so I am happy today that the luck turned in the right direction again and I am very happy with my horse!"*

Philippaerts was delighted with his third-place finish. *"Katanga is an unbelievable mare, she had a break for two months after the European Championship and this is the first time she jumped a 5* Grand Prix again and she jumped fantastic!",* he said.

Thrilled

Maher, who finished third at round three of the Western European League in Lyon, France last weekend, was thrilled with today's winning result which has moved him into third place on the Western European League leaderboard. With a running tally of 35 points he is already within sight of a qualifying spot for the Longines 2024 Final which will take place in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia next April.

"All my horses are in form right now, it's a credit to my team, my owners and my sponsors, we've built this over the last few years and they all deserve this. It's great when it all comes together!", he said this evening.

Despite the challenge it presented, he enjoyed the tension created by the enthusiastic crowd.

"It has been a few years since I was here in Verona last time and it is great for us riders to compete in a venue with so many spectators. They witnessed such good riders and horses today, and this is great for our sport!", he added.

Over one year

Talking about Dallas Vegas Batilly he explained, *"we have her for a little over one year now. I am very fortunate with my owners and sponsors who are very supportive. I had a few upcoming horses, but we felt I needed one more horse ready for the big classes so we got her and it took me some time to get to know her well. She's great, but she likes to be the boss and for me to be the passenger!"*

Asked what he has in mind for the mare after today's success he said wisely, *"I will just enjoy today first! I have learned over the years to enjoy the wins, because in this sport you lose more than you win!"*

Next weekend the Western European League moves to Stuttgart in Germany for round 5 of the 14-leg series so don't miss a hoofbeat...

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