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Miles Extends Her Lead In Galway Downs CIC***

Temecula, Calif., March 29 – Gina Miles and McKinlaigh galloped to a perfect cross-country round at today's Galway Downs International Horse Trials to extend the lead they took during yesterday's dressage phase in the CIC***.

With a score of 47.0, Miles, of Creston, Calif., leads Jolie Sexson, of Martinez, Calif., on Killian O'Connor by 7.4 penalties (54.4). But Canadian Hawley Bennett is just behind on her Olympic veteran Livingstone (55.2). Jennifer Wooten, of, Ramona, Calif., moved up from ninth place to claim fourth place on The Good Witch (60.7).

"He was amazing. He's the best cross-country horse in the whole, wide world. At least, that's what I think," said Miles of McKinlaigh, a 14-year-old Irish-bred gelding owned by Thom Schulz.

Miles said the cross-country course, designed for the first time by Ian Stark of Great Britain, was “definitely a real three-star track. He really gave us some good tests to get us ready.” What Miles is getting ready for next is the Rolex Kentucky CCI**** at the end of April. She’s aiming to run McKinlaigh there for the fifth time.

And her goal after Kentucky is to be selected for the Olympics for the first time. Miles and McKinlaigh rode as individuals at the 2002 World Championships and earned the individual bronze and team gold medals at the 2007 Pan Am Games, but she said riding in the Olympics would be “the pinnacle” of her career.

Miles is one of two riders in the three-star division whose previous performances have put them on the U.S. eventing team’s Olympic training list. Wooten is the other, and team coach Capt. Mark Phillips is on the grounds to advise them and to evaluate their performances.

Bennett, who’s hoping to ride for Canada in the Olympics for the second time on Livingstone, 18, shared Miles’ enthusiasm for Stark’s new course. “I’ll be honest, I was a little bit nervous – nervous about everything because it was all different,” said Bennett. “Ian made some great changes, and the course rode much better than many people thought it would.”

Added Bennett, “But afterward I asked myself, ‘Why did I get nervous?’ [Livingstone] was unbelievable – like a spring chicken. I swear, he just gets better and better.”

All told, 11 of the 17 CIC*** starters finished with no jumping penalties, although eight of them had time penalties, ranging from 4.0 to 26.0. Sandy Shoes and Matthias Schwarz of Germany were eliminated for three refusals, and Bennett retired Gin N' Juice after two run-outs at the second water complex. Claire Roper of Canada withdrew Royal Holly before cross-country.

Sexson, of Martinez, Calif., isn't bound for the Olympics, but she has her own goal with Killian O'Connor, 9. Sexson plans to ship the gray gelding across the country to compete in the Jersey Fresh CCI*** (N.J.) in early June. This is Killian O'Connor's second season at the advanced level and his first start in a CCI***. (A CCI, or international three-day event, has a longer and more challenging cross-country course than a CIC, or international horse trial.)

"The change in the course was very noticeable, because Ian brought some new and different ideas. There were a lot of fresh, new things out there," said Sexson.

Sexson said that running at Galway Downs is always a vital part of her preparation. "To compete on the East Coast or anywhere internationally, you have to jump the big courses, but there are so few events at this level here in California, and we appreciate the dedication of [organizer] Robert Kellerhouse and all the people here," said Sexson.

Stark's new course shook up the CIC**: First-placed Max McManamy and Beacon Hill suffered a run-out at fence 4; second-placed Kate Gillespie and Renegade Reno suffered a run-out at fence

15; and fourth-placed Trisha Jaracz on Myster E retired early on the course. That left Alexandra Knowles, of Auburn, Calif., on Last Call with a one-point lead over Julie Ann Boyer, of Agua Dolce, Calif., on Rumor Hazit.

Knowles, who's been training with Bennett for just over a year, had placed third in dressage, and Boyer had placed fifth.

"I'm so proud of her," said Bennett of Knowles, 21. Last Call is a 9-year-old Mecklenberg mare.

Bennett trains her horses and students at Kingsway Farm, which borders the Galway Downs event grounds, and Knowles rode with Stark in a clinic he conducted on the grounds in January. "His course made you ride forward, which is the way he teaches. And you couldn't take any of the jumps for granted. I didn't think it was over until I rode through the finish flags," said Knowles.

Chelsea Schaefer, of Santa Rosa, Calif., moved up from second to first place in the CIC* on Danny Max, when overnight leader Chloe McNally accrued 9.2 time penalties on Lad's Night Out and dropped to 15th place.

The Galway Downs International Horse Trials concludes on Sunday with the show jumping phase, which begins with the CIC* at 11:30 a.m.

[Complete results are available at www.galwaydowns.com.]