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Miles and McKinlaigh Keep Galway Downs Top Spot

Temecula, Calif., March 30 – Gina Miles and her eight-year partner McKinlaigh finished today what they started on Friday at the Galway Downs International Horse Trials. With a perfectly clear show jumping round, they kept the lead they'd held since the dressage phase to win the CIC***.

Miles and McKinlaigh also took home to Creston, Calif., an Adequan/USEA Gold Cup as the winners of the first Pacific League competition of the year. Both the CIC*** and CIC** at Galway Downs are member events of the U.S. Eventing Association's Adequan Gold Cup Series. The overall Gold Cup Series victors are determined by a cumulative points system throughout the year, with horse-rider pairs earning prize money and points at each of the 13 designated events in three leagues across the United States.

The CIC*** and CIC** split a total of \$10,000 in prize money.

Jennifer Wooten, of Ramona, Calif., used the opposite strategy to secure second place, although it wasn't the strategy she'd planned on using. Riding *The Good Witch*, Wooten climbed from ninth in dressage by jumping faultless cross-country and show jumping rounds. Canadian Hawley Bennett held on to third place with *Livingstone*, despite lowering three rails on the course designed by international course designer Richard Jeffery.

Miles, 34, said that she didn't know before she began her round that other competitors' mistakes had given her a cushion of three rails. Still, she said, her

goal was to notch a clear round to prepare for her next event after Galway Downs, the Rolex Kentucky CCI****, and for her shot at the U.S. Olympic team. "You always have to push yourself, to put pressure on yourself to perform well," she said. "And McKinlaigh really knows his job."

When she crossed the finish line, the loudest cheers came from her husband, her 2-year-old daughter and her 9-year-old son.

McKinlaigh is a 14-year-old, Irish-bred gelding.

The three top finishers in the CIC*** are each aiming for Rolex Kentucky on April 24-27, and all three horses will fly together to Lexington, Ky., on April 21. "I'm pleased to see the California riders do so well here as a preparation for Kentucky," said Miles, the individual bronze and team gold medalist at the 2007 Pan Am Games. "I really want to encourage West Coast eventing and to prove we riders can make teams from out here."

Like Miles, Wooten, 30, is on the U.S. eventing team's Olympic training list. She said she was disappointed with her dressage performance, but she believes that jumping faultlessly showed that she can perform when she has to. "Yesterday I had to go fast, I had to make the time," she said. "I feel like I can be pretty hard on myself and take the pressure, and it's taken me a lot of years to do that."

Bennett was glad to just finish the show jumping course after recovering from a frightening stumble on landing after fence No. 1. "I thought I was going down!" exclaimed Bennett, 30. "That would have been embarrassing if I'd fallen off at the first fence."

The Olympic veteran wasn't sure what happened, but she thought the mishap might have contributed to the three knockdowns. "I think he just jumped so big over the oxer and he couldn't quite stick the landing, and I think it rattled him a little bit. It certainly rattled me," said Bennett.

Bennett cried tears of joy after student Alexandra Knowles jumped without error on Last Call, a 9-year-old Mecklenberg mare, to hold on to the lead in the CIC**. "It's better for me to see one of my kids win than it is to do it myself," said

Bennett, who grew up in British Columbia but has lived in Temecula for the last four years.

Knowles, 21, of Auburn, Calif., said she was “on top of the world.” But she wasn’t surprised to win the blue ribbon and the Adequan/USEA Gold Cup emblematic of her victory in the two-star series event.

“Usually I get really, really nervous, but for some reason this time I wasn’t nervous. I think it’s because that mare can really jump. I knew as soon as I walked in the ring that everything was going to be fine,” said Knowles.

Julie Ann Boyer, on Rumor Hazit, and Alexis Helffrich, on Spike, claimed second and third by also jumping faultless rounds.

Nicholas Cwick, of Saratoga, Calif., had hoped for a top placing in the CIC*** after riding Asterix to second place in dressage, until a run-out late in the course compromised his hopes. But he recovered to ride his own Sir Donovan to the narrowest of victories in the CIC*. Just 5.7 points separated the first eight horses as show jumping began, and the five horses before Sir Donovan jumped had all posted zeroes.

“The pressure made me ride better. It makes me be on my game,” said Cwick.

Sir Donovan is a 6-year-old, Irish-bred gelding he bought as a 4-year-old from the woman who imported him. “He’s a really neat horse. He’s got a great attitude and is very mature for his age,” said Cwick, who hopes to progress up the levels with him.

For complete results, go to www.galwaydowns.com.