



Nicole Shahinian-Simpson and Akuna Mattata seize the CabanaCoast Grand Prix

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WINTER EQUESTRIAN FESTIVAL 2019 – WEEK 6

Nicole Shahinian-Simpson with Akuna Mattata. Photo (c) Sportfot.

The highlight jumper class of week 6 at the 2019 Winter Equestrian Festival, the \$134,000 CabanaCoast Grand Prix CSI3*, was held at Equestrian Village at Palm Beach International Equestrian Center (PBIEC) on Friday, February 15. Taking the top spot of the night was Nicole Shahinian-Simpson (USA) and Akuna Mattata, owned by Silver Raven Farms.

Competing in the Global International Arena at Equestrian Village, 44 entries competed in the first round over a course set by Ana Catalina "Catsy" Cruz Harris of Mexico. With five retirements in the first 11 trips, a clear round was looking difficult to tackle, but riding out of the 21st spot in the order, Shahinian-Simpson and Akuna Mattata made the crowd cheer as the first clear round of the night.

Shahinian-Simpson noted, "I just stuck to my plan. I thought to myself, 'I'm just going to ride it like a speed class – like a timed first round – and stick to the numbers.' Truly that's really how she goes the best anyhow, so I just tried to keep it as simple as possible out there."

Three trips later, Spencer Smith (USA) and Quality FZ, owned by Gut Einhaus LLC, guaranteed a jump-off. As the fastest four-fault round of 10 in the class, Laura Chapot (USA) and Mary Chapot's Chandon Blue took the third spot on the podium in a first-round time of 67.22 seconds.

"The grand prix here is always much more difficult than it walks," said Chapot, who was also named the Martha Jolicoeur Leading Lady Jumper Rider, in memory of Dale Lawler. "The lights, the difficulty of the smaller ring, the new venue – it always seems like you walk it and it doesn't seem too bad and then the rails down come from everywhere. [Catsy is] very clever in the way she sets the course that way. It wasn't one specific problem. For sure [fences] three to four was a difficult choice, but you had to make your choice and make it happen. She did a good job that way."

Chapot and Chandon Blue were second in Thursday's \$36,000 Equinimity WEF Challenge Cup Round 6, and Chapot said the 14-year-old Oldenburg gelding by Chacco-Blue has "been jumping very consistently."

She added, "We did the first couple weeks and then gave him a few weeks off aiming for this show here. For a lot of horses, it's a bit refreshing to come over here. It's a new venue for them, and it perks them up a bit. He's been jumping fantastic all circuit and gotten better and better. This week he was over the top."

Shahinian-Simpson made it clear as she cantered into the ring that she was going for it in the jump-off. She sped around clear in 37.08 seconds, which would give her the win. Smith and Quality FZ were slower in 38.71 seconds after they pulled a rail for four faults.

Smith took over the ride on Quality FZ, a 10-year-old SI gelding by Quintender, in November of 2018, but they have not had a lot of experience in the show ring together.

"I've never done a jump-off with him," Smith acknowledged. "I think the horse is a quality horse like his name. I trust him a bit now, and we started to have a little common ground. He's so scopey, and you can use the scope to get out of any trouble that a course like that could bring."

As a student of Lamaze's, an Olympic individual gold medalist, 22-year-old Smith is learning and taking the experience to further his young career.

"For me, it's been the biggest change in my career and my life to have him choose me to ride some of these horses and to get me to this level," said Smith. "Along with my parents, we have such a big team. I just feel really lucky that he's taken me under his wing. He's an amazing guy, an amazing rider – we all know that – but as a person, he's a super guy. He's like family to me, so it's really nice."

It was a satisfying win for Shahinian-Simpson, who has known Akuna Mattata since birth. She rode Akuna Mattata's dam, SRF Dragonfly, to the top of the sport in 2008 and represented the United States on Nations Cup teams. Akuna Mattata, also known as "Nahla" in the barn, is one of three mares born the same year out of SRF Dragonfly and by Quinar that Shahinian-Simpson has brought along in the jumper ring. The 11-year-old Holsteiner mare has come into her own in the past year.

"It's been really a very meaningful journey with the three of them," she expressed. "We brought them up through the young horse classes, and it's just been a really cool journey. They are very competitive, sassy, and really confident mares, and I've just always let them do it their way and stay out of their way. Nahla was a little behind the others for some different reasons – she had a hormone issue – and then grew out of that and suddenly came on strong. It's been a very cool 11 years."

"This one has had the most experience," she continued. "Every test that's been asked, she just keeps producing. She's growing up. It's a lot of fun to jump these courses with these caliber riders and horses, and it was about rising to the challenge, so it means a lot."

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Press release from Equestrian Sport Productions

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