

## HORSE SHOW

11/9/92

# The Title Is Hers, if Not the Mount

By ROBIN FINN

Special to The New York Times

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J., Nov. 8 — The 109th National Horse Show, historic in its own right, was upstaged on its closing day here at Byrne Meadowlands Arena by three strikingly different performers: a history-making 13-year-old silver gelding, a survival-prone veteran who not only woke at dawn to judge 136 junior Maclay finalists but sneaked into the saddle to win today's \$100,000 grand prix, and a determined teen-ager from New Jersey who finally captured the Rolex-Maclay National Championship on her eighth and final try.

Nicole Shahinian, already the most decorated young rider in the nation, ended her junior career on a crescendo by passing the horse world's strictest test, the Maclay National Championship. Shahinian earned the other top junior laurel, the Medal, two years ago at Harrisburg, Pa.

The 18-year-old Shahinian, who will postpone college and commence her professional career next year, said she'd pinned her hopes and prayers on winning this event, where bad luck had plagued her in the past. Shahinian also welcomed the cooperation she received from 15-year-old Black Ice, the horse she borrowed for the occasion.

## Harrowing Sprint

In contrast to Shahinian's calm outing, the Maclay judge, Michael Matz, used a breakneck speed sprint aboard the French stallion Olisco to

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outdash and outleap a field of eight in the Budweiser/A.G.A. Championship's jumpoff. It was the second consecutive year that Matz was able to win the event, and he called this the type of harrowing ride "that kids shouldn't try at home." It was the 53rd grand prix victory for Matz, but just the first for his mount.

Matz clutched his heart in disbelief after he and Olisco used an impromptu strategy of soaring and scrambling to race through an eight-obstacle jumpoff course in 39:85 seconds. But Matz is no stranger to stress situations. His poise under pressure received international attention in 1989 when, as one of the more fortunate passengers aboard the deadly United Airlines flight that crashed into a Sioux City, Iowa, cornfield, he helped with rescue efforts.

Today he concentrated on building his horse's ego when he wasn't busy evaluating the juniors. "I wanted him to learn to be competitive, and he was today," said Matz, who placed 10th at the Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain.

Darlene McMullen finished in second place in today's event and Debbie Shaffner was third.

He didn't make it to the jumpoff, but Budweiser Gem Twist, ridden in the pinch by Olympic veteran Leslie Lenehan due to regular rider Greg Best's shoulder injury, nonetheless

became the first of his species to win the Horse-of-Year title an unprecedented third time. Gem Twist knocked down a rail in the first round, but his ninth-place finish was sufficient to seal his supremacy in the year-long grand prix standings. He also won in 1987 and 1989.

This had been a somewhat catastrophic year for Gem Twist, whose refusal of a water obstacle at an Olympic trial at Devon ended his bid to make the Olympic team. He then dumped his longtime rider, Best, in another show at Devon in September. Since Best's subsequent surgery sidelined him the remainder of the year, Lenehan, a three-time Olympic veteran, was asked to take the reins here to assure Gem Twist his third title.

"We accomplished what we came here to do," said Lenehan, who had a bit of a selfless day. She rushed off from clinching this spot in the record books for Gem Twist to assist her star pupil, Shahinian, who stood in first place among the 24 Maclay finalists culled from a field of 136 after the morning's preliminary testing. "She's a freak talent for sure," Lenehan said later.

## HOOFBEATS

The National Horse Show will be back again next year at the Meadowlands, where its present leasing agreement runs through 1994. But the show may have to proceed without its Hunter division and will be streamlined to the more economical four-day format suggested by the New Jersey Sports Authority.