

## Everything is, in fact, Bigger in Texas



Heading into the FEI World Cup Finals in Fort Worth, Texas, it had been 11 years since I had attended a World Cup Final in person. On that occasion in 2017, McLain Ward (USA) earned his long-awaited World Cup title in front of a home crowd with HH Azur in Omaha, NE.

This year, it was Kent Farrington's (USA) turn to achieve the feat, earning his first Longines FEI Jumping World Cup™ Final title with another exceptional mare - actually, a pair of mares in Greya and Toulayna.

I was immensely proud to be the lead writer for the FEI at these championships, as well as to host an educational segment on the event's live broadcast window on CBS Sports Network - an incredible opportunity for equestrian sport -

targeted toward the new fans reached with the exposure.

Three years ago, the World Cup's North American League hosted a qualifier in Fort Worth at the historic Will Rogers Memorial Center. While onsite for the event, Split Rock Jumping Tour President Derek Braun organized a tour of the Dickies Arena for our team to get a preview of the site of the 2026 Finals. Even with the arena configured to host a lacrosse event at the time, the venue looked like a perfect fit to host elite equestrian sport.

Rated the No.1 indoor stadium (15,000 seats or fewer), Dickies Arena met those lofty expectations. The venue was decorated beautifully, with a gigantic jumbotron making sure there was not a poor vantage point to watch the competition. The warm-up sat beneath



an expansive glass ceiling, where fans could watch from above at Vendor Village. Stabling was across the street, and European and American horses each had their own barn, with horses living in brand new, custom stalls. Athletes got the full "cowboy culture" experience, with each rider receiving a pair of cowboy boots and custom cowboy hat of their choice. The hats, from Sole Rider's custom cowboy hat bar, were the absolute talk of the town and statement pieces for athletes, officials, and fans. Martin Fuchs (SUI) only took his off for his helmet, and yes, I was also convinced to get one. Country music was also showcased, with Grammy Award-winning band Lady A performing ahead of Saturday's program.



Coming into the event as the World No. 2, Farrington was the undisputed favorite to take the title, and he earned it, leading through all three phases of competition. Toulayna was tabbed for the opening day's faults-converted speed round and delivered, before getting to rest on her laurels the rest of the week. That left Greya to finish the job, and she was best in Friday's jump-off competition before adding a final clear round Sunday to put Farrington three faults ahead of Daniel Deusser (GER). Farrington had to jump clear in that round to win, and he delivered with incredible fortitude. Even with one rail in the first round of Sunday's Third Final Competition, Farrington just simply appeared to be riding on another level, and the crowd was there to support his focus-first cause. Before the final round, he motioned for the fans to quiet their applause so as not to get an excitable Greya worked up. The crowd instantly silenced, saving their raucous applause for Farrington's final, faultless performance.

The same could not be said for the dressage athletes. The crowd positively brought down the house for the Zen Elite FEI Dressage World Cup Final's Freestyle competition, hootin' and hollerin' for every extended trot, one-handed piaffe, tempi changes on a circle, and recognizable song choice. In fact,

the crowd was so loud that Christian Simonson's (USA) horse Indian Rock leapt out of a flying change, while 2024 World Cup Champion Patrik Kittel's (SWE) partner Touchdown kicked up his heels in excitement. While scores were certainly affected, the riders continued to engage the crowd and exited the arena full of emotion.

I laughed. I cried. It was the most incredible night of dressage I've ever been a part of, with no shortage of storylines. Olympic bronze medalist Becky Moody (GBR) and her incredible homebred Jagerbomb were the decisive winners in their World Cup Finals debut. Simonson, also a first timer and the second-youngest rider in the competition, finished second with a personal best. While Kittel finished just off the podium, he praised the crowd and profusely thanked them for being so enthusiastic about his sport. Morgan Barbancon (FRA) announced the retirement of her partner Sir Donnerhall II OLD after their Freestyle; the still-youthful 20-year-old stallion finished his career with a crescendo at his sixth career World Cup Finals appearance (There were not enough tissues handy for this).

A few not in attendance took to social media to criticize the appearance of stands on the live stream that weren't completely

full, but I hope those individuals also understand that the crowds that were in attendance couldn't have been better and made the venue feel like it was at capacity. What can we do to make attendance stronger? I'm not entirely sure who mandates ticket prices and am certain that renting time at a venue like Dickies is not an inexpensive endeavor, but I do hope we can cater more to new fans with affordable pricing, enticing non-equestrian locals to visit and see what the sport is all about. It's also important to recognize that in Europe, where stands might inherently be fuller, other sports like football and cutting (especially popular in Texas) don't happen often, if at all.

From inspiring performances to foot-perfect footing, beautiful and technical courses (massive congratulations, Anderson Lima!), the World Cup Finals more than delivered, shining a strong spotlight on top sport. Now we just need to grow the number of people that get to see it. With a groundbreaking live window on CBS Sports Network, I believe we are trending in the right direction. I couldn't be more grateful to have been a part of it. **HS**

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