

Team Europe Prevails In Epic Speed Battle For Riders Masters Cup At Longines Masters of New York

By Molly Sorge



Team USA & Team Europe preparing to face off ©SportFot

What happens when a team of Europe's top riders arrives at the Longines Masters of New York for an epic showdown with some of the best U.S. riders in a team competition full of speed and strategy? The crowds shout themselves hoarse, the riders go for broke, and the excitement is palpable.

And that's exactly what happened at the Riders Masters Cup on April 28, as Riders USA, with chef d'equipe Robert Ridland at the helm, went head-to-head with the team of Riders Europe, led by chef d'equipe Phillippe Guerdat of Switzerland. The result came down to the very last rounds as the world's best poured on the speed in the battle for the blue and the top winner's share of the \$200,000 prize money.

Riders Masters Cup is presented by EEM, in collaboration with the European Equestrian Federation (EEF), and with Longines as a founding partner. A new annual equestrian competition, the Riders Masters Cup bridges the first and third leg of EEM's Longines Masters Series, which presents one of the most prestigious show jumping events in the world spanning three continents: Europe, Asia, and North America. Season III of the Longines Masters Series kicked off in Paris last December, traveled to Hong Kong in February, and premiered in New York in April.

In the end, the Riders Europe team nosed ahead for the victory in the very last round of the competition, where the U.S. and European riders raced in head-to-head speed duels over two rounds. It was all on the line when last to go for the U.S., McLain Ward, laid down a blistering last ride on HH Gigi's Girl. But Harrie Smolders (NED) took up the challenge and turned in a round full of daring turns and

flat-out galloping to best Ward's time by more than a second and clinch the Riders Europe win. "We went down to the wire in Paris and we went down to the wire again," Ridland said. "That final duel was really one for the ages. We put up one hell of a fight and a great second-half comeback."

Riders USA and Ridland were hungry for a win, as the Riders Europe team had taken victory at the inaugural first leg of the Riders Masters Cup at the Longines Masters of Paris in December. Ridland had Olympic gold medalists Bezie Madden, McLain Ward and Laura Kraut in his line-up along with top talents Georgina Bloomberg and Adrienne Sternlicht.

The U.S. riders faced off against some European veterans—Kevin Staut (FRA), Harrie Smolders, Olivier Philippaerts (BEL), Gregory Wathelet (BEL) and Peder Fredricson (SWE). And at the end of Round 1, it seemed as if the Riders Europe team was firmly in control of the class. Riders from each team were paired up to compete over a speed round and the winner of each duel earned a point for their team. After Round 1, Riders Europe led the points tally by 4 to 1.

But the Riders USA team blazed back as Round 2, where the points were doubled, began. Kraut scored 2 points as the first U.S. rider out of the gate, beating Philippaerts soundly with her round aboard Hello Guv'nor. Then Madden put the Riders USA team ahead 5 to 4 with her win against Staut. Madden was fresh off her win in the Longines FEI World Cup Final and brought the crowd to their feet with her lightning-quick round aboard Jiva.

It was only fitting that the next win from Riders USA came from hometown favorite Bloomberg, who piloted Paola 233 to a

masterfully fast round to defeat Wathélet and put the score at 7 to 4. The excitement was ramping up in the spectators and in the Riders USA camp as the team pulled ahead, but the class was far from over.

A rail for Sternlicht in her second round meant the points for that win went to Fredricson, putting the Riders Europe team on 6 points and definitely within striking range with just one more pair to race—Smolders and Ward.

They're two of the fastest riders in the world, and the Riders Masters Cup fate rested on their shoulders. Ward set the tone with a beautiful and blazingly fast round on HH Gigi's Girl, putting all the pressure on Smolders. But the Dutch phenom, currently ranked No. 1 in the world, was up to the challenge. He kicked Cas 2 into a whole other gear and raced around the course to stop the timers almost 2 seconds faster than Ward had. His round put the Riders Europe ahead by a nose, as the final score was 8 to 7.

"We knew Team USA would be strong tonight because after Paris they wanted to win back home," said Team Europe's chef d'équipe Guerdat. "I think it's more difficult to win not on your home turf, but I have a team who are all champions and the best in the world at the moment. It would be difficult to get a better team than this in Europe."

Ridland noted that he wasn't too worried after Round 1, as he had faith that his team could rebound. "We clawed our way back," he said. "That's what the sport is about. We'll be back again; it's a great format."

Fans and riders alike enjoyed the easy to understand and speed-based format of the class, where wins in head-to-head duels over two rounds resulted in points for each team. "I found it very exciting and it's quite easy to follow, which is always difficult when you're taking an individual sport and making it a team event," said Ward. "You want a system where it's exciting to the end and [the Riders Masters Cup] was a great example of that. It came down to the very last jump. The only thing that went wrong is that the Europeans won, so we'll have to do it again."

"It's really exciting to see the top riders in the world going for speed," said Ridland. "It's a great format and I think everybody got their money's worth. We'll be back again!"

The next installment of the Riders Masters Cup takes place on December 1 during the Longines Masters of Paris, which runs November 30-December 2. For more information on the Longines Masters Series, visit www.LonginesMasters.com and for news on the upcoming Riders Masters Cup events, go to www.RidersMastersCup.com.



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