

Sparks flies at home park on back of legendary steed

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Karen Sparks. Supplied photo.

By *Brendan Shykora*

Karen Sparks wasn't sure she would return to competitive horse riding after having three children. But when legendary equestrian Ian Millar offered her his former horse, it was an opportunity she couldn't pass up.

"Teddy pulled me back to the sport," Sparks said of her mount. "When I stepped onto him and jumped some pretty big jumps for the first time it just kind of clicked."

Her decision to continue riding paid off at the 2018 Ottawa International Horse Show. On the back of the 15-year-old Teddy du Bosquetiau, Sparks won the CSI3 Welcome Speed jumping competition with a clean run in under 78 seconds.

The win took place at Ottawa's Wesley Clover Park, which made it all the more special for Sparks, given she's the park's executive director.

"It felt really good to win at home," said Sparks, 37, who saw an opening for herself when few of the 16 riders before her made it through the course without dropping any obstacles. "I thought maybe I'll just tighten up my turns a little and today could be my day."

Sparks' day was also the first of the tournament, which spanned July 18-22. The competition was sanctioned by the International Equestrian Federation, meaning Sparks earned points toward her world equestrian ranking.

But climbing the equestrian ladder isn't her main priority now that she has a family and a business to tend to. But she says her life off the course has helped lead her to better performances.

"When I went back to competing it was really just for fun, it wasn't because I was wanting to be a professional, it wasn't because I wanted to accomplish anything in particular," she said. "It's been eye opening just how much better that makes you ride."

Second-place finisher Kelly Soleau-Millar was the only other rider to run clean on day one. The U.S. rider is a teammate of Sparks at Millar Brooke Farm in Perth, ON, the barn owned by 10-time Olympian Ian Millar.

"He's an inspirational athlete and Canadian," Sparks said of Millar, who earned the nickname 'Captain Canada' after decades of being a top international rider. "For those growing up in Ottawa with a love for horses, I think he was inspirational to everyone."

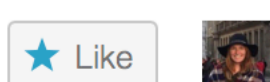
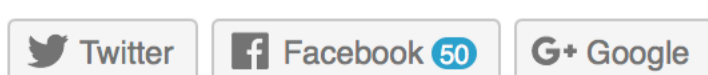
Millar holds the world record for Olympic appearances and was the first person to win back-to-back Show Jumping World Cups in 1988 and 1989, with the powerhouse Big Ben as his mount. At 71 years old, Millar is a model of timelessness. On Saturday he rode his daughter Amy's horse, Truman, to a 6th place finish in the \$132,000 Grand Prix. As Sparks' long-time mentor, Millar shared in the triumph of her opening-day success. "She's turned into an extremely good technical rider in that she can execute the course to perfection, and she has lovely feel for a horse," he said. "She's arguably the best student I've ever had."

Since she was 16-years-old, Sparks has been training with the Millar family at their Perth farm. Ian's son, Jonathon Millar, has played a large role in her development while riding in competitions of his own around the world. The 43-year-old Millar finished 9th in Saturday's Grand Prix.

From her years working with Millar, Sparks says she gained the business acumen that's helped her operate Wesley Clover in addition to her show jumping skillset. "Ian has been a mentor for me not only as a rider, but also as a businessperson."

Wesley Clover hosted the first Ottawa International in 2015. This year it brought together 650 horses from Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and the United States.

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