

Ireland Prevails In Latest Longines League Of Nations

The revamped team competition draws the best of the sport to Ocala.

Story And Photos By **KIMBERLY LOUSHIN**

Coming into the Longines League of Nations Ocala, Ireland's Chef d'Equipe Michael Blake had a game plan. A month before in the first leg in Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, the Irish team was seeded last in the rotation, and with an almost immediate turnaround for the second round, Blake estimated he had about seven minutes to decide which of his four riders would not jump again. (In the new League of Nations format that replaced the previous FEI Jumping Nations Cup this year, four pairs contest the first round, with a drop score, and only three riders jump in the second round, with no drop score.)

Blake knew well the riders he'd brought to the leg hosted at the World Equestrian Center—Ocala, March 21-24, in Ocala, Florida, so he knew exactly how he wanted to proceed. Darragh Kenny, Shane Sweetnam, Daniel Coyle and Cian O'Connor all had ample championship experience, but Sweetnam was a late substitution to the team after Bertram Allen took a bad fall the week prior and was unable to compete. And while Sweetnam's mount Otis Blue had a first-round clear in his first five-star grand prix at the Winter Equestrian Festival (Florida) a couple weeks prior, the horse's relative inexperience meant Blake planned to have him sit out Round 2.

But when the first three—Kenny on Amsterdam 27, Coyle on Legacy and Sweetnam—jumped clear in Round 1, Blake was faced with the decision of whether to have O'Connor

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— CIAN O'CONNOR

jump Maurice to potentially improve their place in the rotation heading into Round 2. (The first-round score is based on time as well as on clear rounds.) He decided not to, subbing that pair in for the second round.

"With Shane, Darragh and Daniel giving us the clear round, we had a very, very short discussion about whether we would jump Cian or not,"

said Blake. "Since the horse had jumped so well under the Wellington lights, we decided we'd go with the fresh horse."

"I'd rather jump 16 less obstacles and go second-to-last than to go in with a tired horse," Blake added.

Blake stuck to his original plan for Round 2, with Otis Blue sitting out. That plan worked well, as Ireland's strong performance led them to the top of the podium. Switzerland's clear efforts in the second round boosted them to second from seventh, while the United States (Laura Kraut, Aaron Vale, Kent Farrington and McLain Ward, who led after Round 1, dropped to third after two of the riders faulted).

"We aim for the podium," said U.S. Chef d'Equipe Robert Ridland. "This was the top 10 teams in the world, so being on the podium when it's the top 10, there's nothing wrong with that. Obviously we would've rather been in the spot that [Ireland] had, but we'll deal with that later; we're giving them a little bit of a head start and a false sense of security."

Ireland now leads the overall series rankings, meaning they'll jump last in the first round in St. Gallen, Switzerland,



The Irish team, comprised of (from left) Shane Sweetnam, Daniel Coyle, Chef d'Equipe Michael Blake, Cian O'Connor and Darragh Kenny, won the Longines League of Nations Ocala.

May 30-June 2. The team's two performances in League of Nations competition so far, coupled with a win in the FEI Jumping Nations Cup Wellington CSIO4* (Florida), puts eyes on Ireland coming into the Paris Olympics, Aug. 1-6.

"I think Michael has used over 30 riders at Nations Cups in the past couple of seasons, so there's a great pool of riders," said O'Connor. "Obviously, we're up there with a shout, but it isn't a given, and we all have to work hard and produce results throughout the summer to hopefully be selected. Any kind of team success, you build up momentum, you build up morale."

"I think it's always great to ride together and to be on the team together, get to know each other's horses, and get a feel for it," he continued, "because when a team starts to win, it's something special. The atmosphere builds up, and everyone starts supporting one another. We won in Wellington last month and now again here, so it's certainly getting a little bit momentum behind Team Ireland, which is great to see."

MEET THE IRISH HORSES

Amsterdam 27: Dk. b. g., 14 years, German-bred Holsteiner (Catoki—Soraya VI, Acord II), bred by Soenke Petersen, owned by Vlock Show Stables LLC and the rider, and ridden by Darragh Kenny.

Legacy: B. m., 14 years, Belgian-bred Zangersheide (Chippendale Z—Regina D, Bon Ami), bred by Romain Rotty, owned by Ariel Grange and the rider, and ridden by Daniel Coyle.

Maurice: B. g., 12 years, Belgian-bred Belgian Warmblood (Thunder VD Zuuthoeve—Vina, Eros Platiere), bred by Johan Juwet, owned by Pat Crean and ridden by Cian O'Connor.

Otis Blue: Gr. g., 10 years, Belgian-bred Belgian Warmblood (Jaguar Van Paemel—Jinx Van Paemel, Numero Uno), bred by Andre and Wesley Callebaut-Beirnaert, owned by Voquest LLC and the rider, and ridden by Shane Sweetnam.

HORSE SHOWS

Laura Kraut jumped two clear rounds with Baloutinue to help the U.S. take third in the Longines League of Nations Ocala.

EMBRACING A NEW FORMAT

The League of Nations is the revamped version of the Fédération Equestre Internationale's Nations Cup series. While the final will still be held in Barcelona, Spain, the number of qualifying competitions was cut in half to five, though for the new format's inaugural year in 2024, there are just four qualifying legs due to the Olympics. The new league is also limited to the top 10 countries, based on the top six riders in the FEI Longines Rankings, including one U25 rider.

The competition is a hybrid of the old Nations Cup and the Olympic format. In the first round, each team fields four riders with a drop score. For the second round only three riders from the top eight teams move forward, with all scores counting toward the final tally.

"Obviously I didn't like [the format] at all in Abu Dhabi [where Ireland was second], but I like it a bit better here," Blake said after Ireland's Ocala win. "It really does change everything. I mean, Switzerland came from seventh to second. You'd think you couldn't do that, but they did. They came and delivered three clears in the second round, and then other countries fell away. You need to be really sure of the three people that you're putting in. You need to know that they can get it done, and get it done over three rounds. You have to get a good score from everybody. Somebody that can possibly drop more than one fence can't be in that three, I think."

Ridland said adjusting to the new format wasn't difficult given the change to three-person teams that happened for the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. The biggest difference from the Olympic format is that teams have options moving into the second round, he said.

"I think it's great for spectators that don't know our sport well," said Ridland. "Almost every other sport doesn't allow you to throw away any of your rounds that you don't like, unless you're playing amateur golf with a mulligan. You hit

the ball in the water, they count that. They don't say, 'Well, OK, that's your discard hole, move onto the next hole.'

"The order of where the teams are at any given minute is very clear," he said. "We could see that from the warm-up area; that's always nice. And traditional Nations Cups you have to [think], 'Well, what if? What if that's the discard score?' Sports shouldn't be a list of what ifs. It should be scoreboard, scoreboard. I love the new format. I like the idea of the four riders to start with the discard there because that gives you some options and then go into the final round without. I think it's an ideal format."

The competition also brought some of the toughest competition to U.S. soil since the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games (North Carolina), with many of the teams fielding riders who are on the Olympic trail. The team competition featured 16 of the top 20 on the FEI Longines Rankings, while two others, whose countries did not field teams, competed in Thursday's grand prix, which was won by Switzerland's Martin Fuchs and Leone Jei.

"I think obviously everybody came here with the intention to try and win. It was very, very strong teams, top riders, 18



Switzerland's Martin Fuchs won the \$330,000 Lugano Diamonds Grand Prix during Longines League of Nations week with Leone Jei.

of the top 20 in the world," said Kenny, who is based in the U.S. "It's incredible to have that standard here."

Kraut, who posted a double-clear effort for the U.S. and was sixth in the grand prix, said having such a high-caliber competition Stateside benefited not just the athletes but the sport as a whole.

"I think it's incredible," she said. "I think for the people here to get to see this sport the way it is, and not on television, but to actually see it live is probably not only exciting but educational. The number of people who were watching everyone flattening and really paying attention, I thought it was great, and it's inspirational for young riders to see Henrik von Eckermann and Ben Maher [World No. 1 and 2] and people like that. So I think it's wonderful." 🐾

Longines League Of Nations Ocala Ocala, Fla.—March 23

Team	1st Round	2nd Round	Total
1. Ireland			
Amsterdam Z/Darragh Kenny	0	4	
Legacy/Daniel Coyle	0	0	
Maurice/Cian O'Connor	(DNS)	1	
Otis Blue/Shane Sweetnam	0	-	
			5
2. Switzerland			
Le-Minka/Steve Guerdat	0	0	
Just Special VK/Plus Schweizer	(8)	0	
Leone Jei/Martin Fuchs	0	0	
Orelle/Janika Sprunger	8	-	
			8
3. United States			
Baloutinue/Laura Kraut	0	0	
Landon/Kent Farrington	0	8	
Callas/McLain Ward	0	4	
Carissimo 25/Aaron Vale	(4)	-	
			12

Also competed: 4. Netherlands (Highway TN N.O.P./W. Greve, Beauville Z N.O.P./M. van der Vleuten, Uricas v/d Kattevennen/H. Smolders, Jourdain VDL/J. Vrieling), 12; 5. Germany (My Prins Van Derperheide/D. Wil, Checker 47/C. Kukuk, United Touch S/R. Vogel, DSP Chakrala/A. Thieme), 20; 6. Brazil (QH Alfons Santo Antonio/Y. Mansur, Like A Diamond Van Het Schaek/M. Modolo Zanotelli, Major Tom/R. Pessoa, Edesa's Vidal 8/C. Rivetti), 28; 7. Belgium (Toupe De La Roque/P. Devos, Delux Van T & L/N. Bruynseels, Katanga V/H. Dingeshof/N. Philippaerts, Bond Jamesbond De Hay/G. Wathelet), 33; 8. France (Cayman Jolly Jumper/S. Delastre, GL Events Dorai D'Agully/O. Penrou, Beau De Laury Z/K. Staut, Iglesias D.V./O. Robert), E. Did not compete in round 2; Sweden (Glamour Girl/H. von Eckermann, Odina Van Klapscheut/P. Andersson, For Killy/A. Landeblad, Aicapone Des Carmille/P. Fredricson), Great Britain (Point Break/B. Maher, Imperial HBF/T. Gredley, I-Cap CL Z/J. Mendoza, Romeo 88/H. Charles).

MEET THE U.S. HORSES

Baloutinue: B. g., 14 years, German-bred Hanoverian (Balou Du Rouet—Utika, Landon S), bred by Heinrich Meyer, owned by St. Bride's Farm, and ridden by Laura Kraut.

Callas: Dk. b. m., 16 years, German-bred Holsteiner (Casall—Noblesse I, Coriano), bred by Jürgen Böge, owned by Beechwood Stables LLC, and ridden by McLain Ward.

Carissimo 25: Ch. g., 11 years, German-bred Holsteiner (Cascadello—T-Clintissima, Clinton), bred by Sport A Media S.R.O., owned by Debbie Smith, and ridden by Aaron Vale.

Landon: Ch. g., 11 years, Belgian-bred Zangersheide (Comiflo Plus Z—Indigo Van De Meulenber, Quadrillo), bred by Danny Nijs, owned by Haity Mc Nerney, and ridden by Kent Farrington.