

Nicole Walker wins the Caledon Cup in show jumping

By Bill Rea

Aurora resident Nicole Walker started competing at the international level just three years ago, but she's got a lot to show for it. As of Sunday, September 25, she is the Caledon Cup champion after the Canadian Show Jumping Tournament Caledon at Caledon Equestrian Park in Palgrave.

Walker, 22, and her mount Deko De Landetta Z won the \$86,000 Caledon Cup Phase 3 Sunday. She combined that with a second-place performance in the first phase last Thursday afternoon and a fourth-place showing Friday evening in the indoor ring. Sunday saw 33 horse-rider combinations enter the event on the course designed by Leopoldo Palacios from Venezuela, and Walker was the last one to go. She was among nine to make it to the jump-off, where again she and her mount were the last to enter the ring. She agreed that was an advantage, because she knew what numbers she had to beat.

And she did it by just a fraction of a second.

They turned in a clear round in the jump-off in 41.91 seconds, shaving less than half a second off the time turned in by Kean White of Rockwood aboard For Freedom Z, and Ali Ramsay from Victoria, B.C., who was riding Hermelien. They both completed the course in 42.36, tying them for second place in Sunday's event.

"I don't know what the secret's been," Walker commented after the award ceremony.

She gave a good deal of the credit to her horse, a 12-year-old bay stallion.

"He's been jumping well all week," she said.

In addition to her share of the prize money, Walker also received a \$1,000 bonus from class sponsor HEP for wearing its branded saddle pad in all three phases of competition.

"I knew what I had to do!" she told Starting Gate Communications after the event. "I think the jump-off suited my horse really well. He's fast in the turns and he's fast on the straightaways, so it was a good jump-off course for him. I didn't want to give a pull on the reins; I know he is fast, I knew I could trust him, and he was super for me."

The win was Walker's second career victory in International Equestrian Federation (FEI) sanctioned competition, with the other coming earlier this summer in the \$25,000 CSI2* Prix Hotel Byblos in St. Tropez, France.

"Thank you to the sponsors," added Walker, who trains with Irish Olympic medalist Cian O'Connor. "Without them, these classes wouldn't exist. Luckily, I had the HEP saddle pad on all week long and got the extra \$1,000 there as well!"

Friday evening's \$35,000 event was won by Ramsay and Hermelien. She was among eight out of 39 riders to jump clear and make it to the jump-off, and in the final round, she was almost half a second faster than Ian Millar aboard Baranus.

Ramsay, 24, is just starting her second year at this level of competition, and Friday's was her first Grand Prix victory.

"I've been second and third and fourth enough," she declared with a big grin.

Hermelien is a nine-year-old Belgian warmblood mare.

"The horse always feels great," Ramsay said. "I guess she was extra reliable today."

The first phase of the Caledon Cup last Thursday was a speed event, meaning there was no jump-off. The \$10,000 event was taken by Orangeville's Kim Farlinger, riding Stanley Stone, who's owned by Alan Chesler.

"Stanley Stone and I have been together a couple of years now," she commented after Thursday's action with her 11-year-old warmblood mount. "He's a fast horse. He's very careful and he's fast along the ground."

The previous Thursday saw Farlinger and Stanley Stone complete the clear round in 69.76 seconds, about a second and a half faster than the second-place combination of Walker and Deko De Landetta Z.

Farlinger and Stanley Stone were in Friday's event, but picked up a total of nine faults.

Things were looking good in Sunday's event until a frightening moment about halfway through the course when Farlinger fell from her mount. It took her a few minutes and some assistance to get back on her feet, but she was able to leave the ring under her own power.

Sunday's competition saw Beth Underhill get into the jump-off on Count Me In, but they had a rough time in the second round. The horse refused at one jump, and piled up seconds on the clock, emerging with 11 faults.

Mac Cone from King City made it to the jump-off Friday night and turned in a clear round on Gasper van den Doorn to take third spot. Four jumping faults kept them out of the jump-off Sunday.

Olympian Millar won the Caledon Cup two years on Dixson, but they missed getting into Sunday's jump-off by a fraction of a second.

Susan Horn from Bolton was 0.18 seconds faster than Millar, riding Balintore, and that was good enough to get her 10th place for the day.