

SUN SETS ON FIVE-DAY FEAST OF EQUESTRIANISM AT ROYAL WINDSOR

After a final day in which competitors had battled wind and rain, the clouds finally lifted to set the seal on five days of superb competition at Royal Windsor.

A celebration of the horse in every sense, Royal Windsor is unique in drawing together virtually every facet of the equestrian world.

Set against the splendour of the private grounds of Windsor Castle, a packed programme drew in good crowds to see nearly 3,000 horses competing in a record 250 classes from the Daks Pony Club Mounted Games to the Alltech Royal Windsor Grand Prix.

This year, innovation was at the heart of the show with new classes including the Amtrust Equine RWHS Unaffiliated Championships, the culmination of a new national series aimed at grass roots riders. The series enabled more amateur riders to compete on Royal Windsor's prestigious stage and contributed to an increase in ticket sales at the box office as it drew supporters from across the country.

On Saturday evening, the new BHS Frogmore Arena played host to the first ever SEIB Pro-Am TREC Challenge – this featured leading riders from across the disciplines, including dressage's Spencer Wilton and Laura Bechtolsheimer, show jumpers Tim Stockdale and Robert Whitaker and event riders Dickie Waygood and Lissa Green. In a victory for the newcomers, the competition was won by horse whisperer Kelly Marks with Dickie Waygood in second and British team TREC team member Anna Weston in third.

In another first, the opening day of the show featured top level dressage, with a Grand Prix Kur won by British dressage team member Richard Davison and Hiscox Artemis. The arrival of dressage on the programme was a precursor to the Alltech FEI European Dressage Championships to be held in conjunction with the European Show Jumping Championships at Windsor during August (25th-30th).

The show proved a good test run for the new facilities which will play host to some of the world's leading combinations over the course of the European Championships. These included expanded grandstand seating for more than 7,000 spectators, an increased members' area, barn-style stabling, the new BHS Frogmore Arena and warm up area.

Organiser Simon Brooks-Ward said that the show's new layout had worked well. "We are proud to showcase a unique variety of equestrian sports and endeavour and this year we went even further in bringing new faces to the show. "The new infrastructure served us well and I think was appreciated by both riders and spectators alike. This success is a great springboard for this summer's Europeans, which after a superb week's sport, everyone with an interest in equestrianism, should be eagerly awaiting. Ahead of London 2012, these championships will also be a marvellous opportunity to highlight horse sports in the UK at the top level in an unrivalled setting."

The £12,500 prize-pot Alltech Royal Windsor Grand Prix was the highlight of the final day's show jumping. A cliff-hanger contest was won by the last combination to go in the nine-horse second round – Geoff Lockett and Valblanc Van Het Panishof who just piped Billy Twomey and Je T'Aime Flamenco into second place. Geoff said the conditions underfoot in the Castle arena had been perfect and if anything, were helped by the rainfall. "Having watched William [Whitaker], I just knew I had to jump the second fence and I gave it an awful lot of respect," he said, praising Bob Ellis's superb track, the biggest outdoor test of the season so far.

Second-placed Billy Twomey, hopeful of a place on the Irish team for this summer's Europeans added: "The fact that the horse has been here and been into the arena is useful for the championships."

Royal Windsor's Castle Arena plays host to a rich variety of action to entertain the crowds. Other highlights over the five days included the Daks Pony Club Mounted Games which was captured by the England team. They won by 192 points to the Republic of Ireland's 149.

The show is also a fantastic showcase for the sport's military traditions. A well-supported Land Rover Services Team Jumping competition saw the South Yorkshire Police narrowly defeat a team from Thames Valley Police with Army Medical Services in third place. In the first round of this competition local interest had focussed on the youngest participants in the class, from Wellington College CCF. The team of Charlotte Murray, Sophie Sedgewick-Dwane and Sophie Edwards from Crowthorne did well to reach the final, coming 10th overall.

On the penultimate day of the show, the coveted Household Cavalry Best Turned Out Trooper Award was presented by Her Majesty The Queen to Trooper Openg Frimpong riding Endurance. Her Majesty also had reason to celebrate during the show with a win for her own Balmoral Moorland in the Highland Championship.

Away from the arena action, the final day saw the culmination of a tense **Land Rover International Driving Grand Prix**. Johann Jacob, the FEI course builder, had designed an extremely testing cones course to finish the three phase competition. The smallest class of the three - pony teams – were the first to take on the challenge. Jean de Cloedt from Belgium, lying second, did the best round of the class but it was not sufficient to catch the overnight leader Dieter Hofs from Germany who secured the win. He made his Windsor debut last year when he came fourth. In horse pairs Beat Schenk from Switzerland also retained his lead in the final phase. This was Schenk's second time of competing here. He was a winner in 2006. Only one penalty had separated second and third placed Harry Verstappen and Francois Dutilloy of France; in the cones Dutilloy managed to overtake Verstappen to come second. All eyes were on the final of the horse teams; with 2.5 penalties between the leaders Boyd Exell of Australia and Ysbrand Chardon of Holland it was always going to be a needle-edge contest. In second place Chardon drove a superb clear picking up just 1.3 time penalties. Exell had had to substitute a horse into his team following an injury to one of his wheelers in the marathon. When one cone fell he knew he had to make the time to beat Chardon but in pushing for it, another ball fell. With it Exell dropped to second place and Chardon claimed the win for the third time at Royal Windsor.

As ever, Royal Windsor attracted guests from beyond the horse world with Martin Clunes and Barry Humphries among those soaking up the action.

TV presenter Alan Titchmarsh who is currently filming an hour-long ITV documentary focussing on Royal Windsor Horse Show and the Royal family's passion for horses, went behind the scenes during the show. The filming highlighted both the competitive participation of the Royal family at Royal Windsor and also featured the Duke of Edinburgh's official duties as an obstacle steward in the driving trials competition.

Spending time at Royal Windsor rekindled Mr Titchmarsh's own equestrian interest. Not having ridden for ten years, on the eve of the show, he was given a guided ridden tour of the showground by Royal Windsor Show organiser Simon Brooks-Ward. Inspired by his experience, he was given a taste of the art of showing by Katie Jerram, climbing aboard her lightweight hunter Azarax following the hunter championship on Thursday.

Mr Titchmarsh said: "I was incredibly honoured to be given this rare opportunity, particularly when it is held at such a magical place as Windsor Castle."