

Sanders And Sputnik Orbit Into First At Centennial Field Hunter Championships Finals

Marc C. Patoile

After 16 regional qualifying competitions, finalists from all over the country congregated in Leesburg, Va., on May 27 for the MFHA Centennial Field Hunter Championships Finals.

And topping them all was a junior rider from a hunt recognized in 2005. Stuart Sanders, 18, rode her Sputnik to victory, representing the Caroline Hunt (Va.).

Sputnik became the crowd favorite as he deliberately pushed the hand gate open using his nose and shut it the same way, which Sanders' mother, Susan, said was nothing new, "as he always does that out hunting."

"It was a major surprise to win. It was such an opportunity. Just being a finalist was unbelievable, and I think they did a great thing bringing foxhunters from all over the country together," Sanders said.

"The thing about fox-hunting is that everyone is so nice about everything. I was wishing everyone good luck, and even if they didn't make the cut, everyone was congratulating the ones who did. It was a great feeling. To be a junior and be so welcomed by people who are older and more experienced than you is so comforting."

The family bought Sputnik, (a 9-year-old Thoroughbred-Russian Warmblood cross) as a weanling from his breeders, Carolyn and Joe Williams of StillPoint Farm.

Sputnik, who is registered as "Gargaren," is by the Williams' Russian stallion Groms, and out of a show hunter mare. "We took him to his first hunter pace when he was 2 and still a stallion. We cut him when he was 3, and started hunting him when he was 3 and 4," said Sanders.

"He really has the great-

est personality. He's never had a bad day in his life," she said. "The hardest thing about breaking him was pulling his mane. He's lived in a great environment his entire life with people who love him."

Sanders has also dabbled in showing and eventing with Sputnik, but her favorite activity is whipping-in.

"I really enjoy that aspect of it. I like watching the

hounds work, and I think the entire sport is great," she said.

Sanders' mother, Susan, gave her the love of horses.

"When she got back into it, she brought me along. I started riding when I was 7, and she got interested in hunting. It kind of became a mother-daughter thing at our barn—three pairs of us would go. It's something we do that's special for us and our relationship," Sanders said.

"Normally I would be hunting almost every single weekend, but I started school last fall at Virginia Tech. Unfortunately, I only got to hunt two or three times. I'm hoping to get out more next season, since I'll be a sophomore and it'll be a little bit easier," she said. "I've done a little bit of showing, and it's a completely different feeling when you're with foxhunters, and I enjoy it much more. I was definitely thrilled and unaware that I was going to do so well."

► A Good Challenge

Dave Denson built the courses for the Finals, himself a transplant from the A-circuits, stock pens, and racetracks, where he sharpened his riding skills. Upon relocating to hunt country, he decided to take up fox hunting and is proud to wear Middleburg Hunt colors.

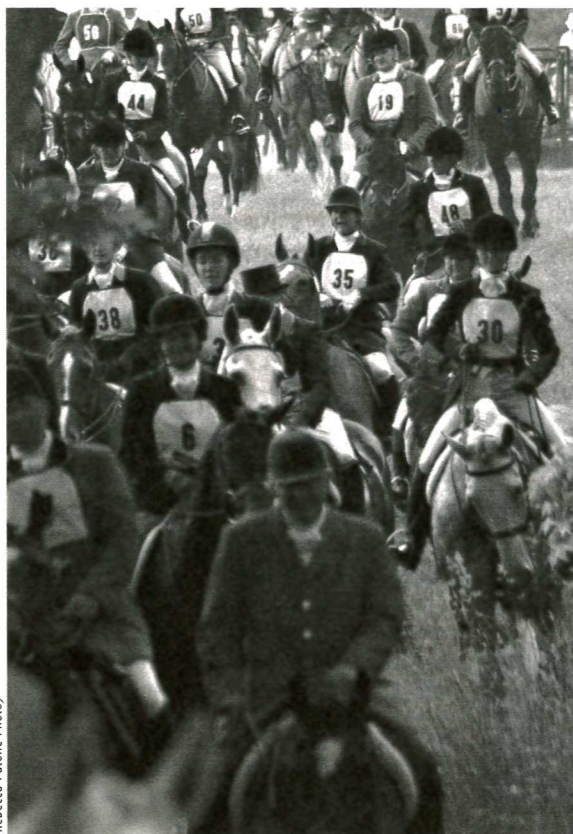
At the welcoming reception for competitors at the National Sporting Library, he promised, "a course designed with the field hunter in mind." Many riders would have found the mock hunt and individual test courses challenging, despite his humble promise that it would be a straight-forward course over natural obstacles, about 3-feet in height.

With 1,200 acres of prime hunt country to work with to create a mock hunt, a custom designed handy hunter course, and a spectacular mansion setting, it'd be tough to dream up a more perfect location for this event of the century. The setting was complete with manicured lawns and mowed trails through the forests, but also

Stuart Sanders and Sputnik jumped to the top of the Centennial Field Hunter Championships Finals.



(Rebecca Patoile Photo)



(Rebecca Paroile Photo)

Competitors in the Centennial Field Hunter Championships Finals showed their skills in a crowded mock hunt.

horses from far-off places such as Arizona, California, and Canada. And, of course, those from nearer places also arrived ready for competition, as the Finals were modeled after the Virginia Field Hunter Championships.

► A Full Day

Exactly half of the competitors started with the best turned-out class. Taking home the blue was the stunningly classic light bay Thoroughbred gelding, Gol Lee, with Kathleen O'Keefe (Casanova Hunt [Va.]) in the irons.

Competitors were divided into two groups and then proceeded to an under saddle class on the immaculately groomed green. From the tree-lined alleys, spectators gathered

trails shaded by evergreens, magnolias, and dogwoods.

The Finals started with an optional best turned-out class, in which there were more than 30 competitors, in scarlet or black frocks, shadbellies, and tails. Eyes were drawn up and down the line, perhaps focusing a bit longer on the lone side-saddled rider, complete with veil.

Appointments of sandwich cases, flasks, hunt whips, rain gloves, breeches with buttons, garters, and all the finer points were scrutinized by the judges. Many enjoyed the event as an education in the traditions of horsemanship and hunting.

Dr. G. Marvin Beeman, MFH of Arapahoe (Colo.) commented that, "tradition for this sport shows respect for the hunt, the hounds, and the quarry. Once you lose the tradition, you will soon lose everything else." In 2008, Dr. Beeman is taking the reins as President of the MFHA from Mason Lampton, MFH of Midland (Ga.).

The Centennial competitions of horses and hounds were largely Mr. Lampton's idea—an idea carried out by hundreds of accomplished volunteers who quickly got behind his brainstorm to celebrate foxhunting and raise funds for the future of the sport.

Penny Denegre, MFH of Middleburg (Va.), was the chair of the field hunter competition. Together with Viviane Warren and Kathleen O'Keefe, one or more of the committee attended all 16 regional events, each of which qualified four horses for the national Finals in Virginia.

More than 400 horses competed for these 64 spots in the Finals. Finalists trailed

in the shade and many paid for a front row tailgating spot.

The mock hunts followed through some of 1,200 acres of Morven Park, a piece of the



(Rebecca Paroile Photo)

Loudoun Hunt West (Va.) country. A fitting piece of history, as this estate was owned by Governor Westmoreland Davis who was an avid foxhunter and served as MFH of the Loudoun Hunt in 1906 and was a founder of the MFHA.

Each division enjoyed nearly an hour of hunting behind Gus Forbush, MFH of Old Dominion Hounds (Va.) who provided a graceful lead as Field Master. Huntsman John R. Tabachka of the Middleburg Hunt simulated runs, checks, "staff please," and blew for home.

There were a few short bursts of speed, but the judges were looking for a field hunter with the manners to go in the front and the back, as several times the field was reversed single file by the staff or asked to hold hard while all competitors caught up. Jumps featured several coops, a drop bank, a jump onto the road, and a small creek. The second division finished just in time for a brief sprinkling of rain before the individual tests for the top 16.

At the Centennial closing ceremonies, Will O'Keefe announced the work-off on the lawn in front of the Morven mansion. The crowd swelled under a tent that was the size of a football field and at tables on the lawn, behind white picket fences.

The 16 in the individual test had to face eight solid fences, gallop up the mansion lawn to an awaiting bridled horse, pony it across the lawn at a trot, hand it off to a waiting attendant, canter a few more fences, stop and drop a rail, trot that fence, and, finally, open and close a hand gate.

Rebekah Robinson, who hunts with the Radnor Hunt (Pa.) and finished second on Sir Galahad, commented, "I used my hunt whip to my advantage to drop the rail—being short on a tall horse, it really comes in handy. I thought the course was great, and the hunt was a lot of fun."

"Putting this together has been, of course, a lot of effort, but it has also been wonderfully rewarding," Denegre said. "People have had so much fun and have shown much camaraderie in the sport—it's been wonderful. There is in excess of 4,000 people here today for the hound shows and hunter championship—a wonderful tribute to the sport of foxhunting."

LEESBURG, VA—MAY 27.

JUDGES: Betty Oare, Oliver Brown, Michael Elmore, James Hatcher, Tommy Lee Jones, Noel Twyman.

BEST TURNED-OUT CH: Gol Lee, Kathleen O'Keefe, Casanova Hunt.

RES: Debonair, Patti Brantley, Live Oak Hounds.

MOST SUITABLE: Stoney Brook, Morley Thompson Jr., Camargo Hunt.

BEST JUNIOR: Sputnik, Stuart Sanders, Caroline Hunt.

Performance Phase - 1. Sputnik; 2. Sir Galahad, Rebekah Robinson, Radnor Hunt; 3. Leica, Julie McKee, Midland Foxhounds; 4. Eastern Shore, Fran Loftus, Andrews Bridge; 5. Sherman, Will Coleman, Keswick Hunt; 6. Clementine, Tracey Cover, Middleburg Hunt; 7. Right On Target, Sara McIntosh, Blue Ridge Hunt; 8. Steeley Dan, Debra LaMee, Arapahoe Hunt.

Kathleen O'Keefe of Casanova Hunt's elegant and correct traditional attire earned her the title of Best Turned-Out at the Centennial Field Hunter Championships Finals.