



II THE FOREIGNERS

LUDGER BEERBAUM IN THE LEAD, AND SOME WOMEN

The line-up reunited at La Baule will provide an interesting mix of the great stars, among some new heads, in terms of both riders and their horses. In this post-Olympic year it's already time for preparation towards the next Olympic Games, that in Beijing. It's not long from now until 2008 in terms of training a Grand Prix horse, and giving them the necessary experience to compete on the most demanding of jumping circuits.

At the time of writing these lines, entries have not yet closed. There thus remains some room to maneuver and for the Chefs d'Equipe to make changes according to the results and form of the moment for the horses. Fifteen days after the World Cup final in Las Vegas (USA), some of the major combinations on the circuit will miss the first leg of the Samsung Super League, to give their stars some time to recover from their efforts and the effects of the trip.

Finally, another element in the equation in order to understand the forces involved, the collision at the top of the hierarchy between the CSIO ***** SL of La Baule, and the CSI **** Hamburg, Germany. On the French side, it's the first leg of the 2005 Super League, while for our neighbours across the Rhine, it's a historical contest with its famous Derby – as in La Baule – which, in addition, is a stage in the Riders' Tour: an annual circuit of 10 stages disputed primarily in Germany and comprising a class reserved for sponsored teams: Audi and Co.... Sponsoring today is an exercise in reality for professional riders at the high level, with perhaps a French exception. Only Hubert Bourdy and Philippe Léoni will contest certain stages of the Riders' Tour 2005, under the VDL Groep colours managed by Dutchman Jan Tops.

National interest on one side, commercial interest on the other. It's a choice mere mortals must place upon themselves, in as much as certain riders have fewer means to be as organised as Ludger Beerbaum. Entered for the first two days in La Baule in order to dispute the Nations' Cup with his horse Goldfever, the #2 in the world will then jump on an aircraft Friday evening in order to run to the Riders' Tour and the Hamburg Derby on Saturday and Sunday! Everyone doesn't possess the means, neither in horses nor in budget to have horses at two similarly important events on the same weekend.

In any case, this will be the last year that such a telescoping between two great events will take place. Next year, a new clause in the FEI regulations will provide that competitions under the Super League label will be protected: no ***** event or **** can oppose each other.

In this context, the German team will be carried along by their leader, accompanied by his pupil, Marco Kutscher (ranked #7 in the world), double Olympic medallist – individual and team – in Athens. Another fellow-member of the Olympic medal-winning team, Otto Becker, will also make the trip, joined by Olympic medallist in Atlanta (1996), Ulrich Kirchhoff who returns to the top level. To make the fifth member, Mylene Diederichsmeier (ranked #103), who can consider her selection to the German team something of a promotion. German

'female riders' have always been rare in the German team, except for those of Anglo-Saxon origin for one – Helena Weinberg (née Dickinson), and American for another, Meredith Michaels, who became a Beerbaum after marrying Markus.

Among the British, the situation resembles that of France: one puts forward the old veterans, John Whitaker (#51) at the head, and one 'throws' into the large circuit of the Nations' Cup, the back-up! Good blood cannot lie: his son Robert (#39) and Ellen Whitaker (#84), the niece of John and daughter of Steven, could compete together for the first time in a Nations' Cup SL. Twenty-four-year-old Ellen, a brilliant young rider, was certainly noticed in Florida this past spring. Once is not a habit, as the British team will include a second female: Alex Rident, based in Normandy with her husband Paul Rident. William Funnel – husband of Pippa, the exceptionally gifted British eventer – and Mark Armstrong will complete the team.

Our neighbours the Belgians have lined up their most experienced candidates: Phillipaerts, Lejeune, Lansink, and Demeersman. That fine and accomplished quartet, with a 'ghost' from the past: Jean-Claude Vangeenberghe, a pillar of the Belgian team in the eighties. New blood does not yet run in floods with our neighbours.

The Americans have taken the measurement of the Super League. For their second season they are sending a largely female battalion to Europe: Beezie Madden (#12 in the world, #3 in the USA) at the head, the first American to have returned to the 'top ten' in recent years. Laura Kraut is ranked 20th in the world, but leads her home rankings. This year, 2005, will also see the return of the Anne Kursinski, a great rider from the eighties, and ranked #5 over the Atlantic. Schuyler Riley (#6 USA), and Georgina Bloomberg (#9) is fifth titular. Only the United States can today align an all-female premier team. These leading candidates will also form the base of the team that will contest the first three stages of the SSL: La Baule, Rome and St-Gallen.

Le new Dutch Chef d'Equipe, Rob Ehrens, did not have much the choice. Indeed, Wim Schroeder and Leopold Van Asten have hardly recovered from injuries. Eric van der Vleuten was in Las Vegas. One will find one former lady winner of the GP of La Baule, Angélique Hoorn, shouldered by a former European Champion, Piet Raymakers, as well as Wout Jan van der Schans and Jeroen Dubbeldam, Olympic Champion in Sydney (2000). An experienced team.

The riders wearing green, like the emerald isle will be playing a card of experience with the return following an injury break of Coolcorran Cool Diamond, the stallion of Robert Splaine. The return also of Dermott Lennon (#57), World Champion in Jerez (2002), who comes back following injuries to his horses, and to himself. Trevor Coyle, based in Germany, will undoubtedly also make the starting line.

Finally, the Swiss team welcomed for the first year to the Super League, will be bringing their pillar, Markus Fuchs (#3). Four other couples, including two who formed the base of their Olympic team, will leave their footprints in the ground of the François André stadium.

Some riders have been invited to run as individuals: the 'forever young veteran' Luis Alvarez Cervera, plus Cayetano Martinez de Irujo under Spanish colours; Judy-Ann Melchior (Belgium), Sonia Fiquel (Israel), Svante Johannson (Sweden), plus two Italian riders.

- The world rankings are those up to the beginning of April. Updates are made at the beginning of each month.