



V INTERVIEW WITH THE SWISS TEAM

ROLF GRASS

THE TWELVE SWISS OF ROLF GRASS, NEW SWISS CHEF D'EQUIPE

Following two years of keen fighting – initially against the United States, then against Sweden last year – the Swiss team has finally managed to pass the bar of the Samsung series (the equivalent of division 2 if the Super League is division 1) to reach the Super League.

"Last year, 16 riders competed in Nations' Cups around the world to succeed in beating the Swedes. It was very difficult because, like us, they wanted promotion (the Swedes were relegated at the end of the first season in 2003). They have each time fielded their best couples – those of the Olympic Games – to beat us. But thanks to our five victories in CSIO, we succeeded in extremis to pass them. To form part of the eight teams of the Super Samsung League is very important for us: that gives us the recognition of the public, of the media, which helps us to find sponsors, and it is an example for the young people".

This year, Rolf Grass thinks he will be able to line up 12 riders and 15 horses (Markus Fuchs and Steve Guerdat each have two or three horses at their disposal capable of competing at this level). *"We will start with 12 riders to finish with five couples for the European Championships. The Super League is going to be our circuit of preparation and selection. Like for the Olympic Games, I will work to compare the shape of the horses, but also with performance statistics. That did not do badly for us last year because the youngsters who went to the Games had very good performances. In La Baule you will almost certainly see the team that finished fifth in the Olympic Games: Fabio Crotta and Mrs Pompadour, Christina Liebherr and No Mercy, Markus Fuchs with La Toya or Grannie, lacking Tinkas Boy (see interview with Markus Fuchs below). Only Steve Guerdat, who will return from the World Cup in Las Vegas will not be there. I will make my choice for the fourth person between Céline Stauffer with the Selle Français Daloubet d' Évordes and Nicklaus Schurtenberger with Cantus."* This latter couple, less known publicly, was a craftsman of the accession of Switzerland to the SSL, being associated with three of the five victories in Nations' Cup last year: Buenos Aires (ARG), Podebrady (CZE), and Kecskemet (HUN).

In addition to a good performance at the Europeans, Rolf Grass (who has been a Chef d'Equipe for two years after assisting former Chef d'Equipe Martin Walter for many years) is aiming at the middle of the classification in the Super League circuit for 2005: *"There are four teams which are stronger than us but three others that we can beat. We should finish fourth or fifth in the final classification, after Barcelona in September "*

MARKUS FUCHS: AT THE DAWN OF HIS FIRST SUPER LEAGUE SEASON

You will compete in Baule the first stage of the Super League. What is your program? Will you be present for all the stages?

Now we have succeeded in reaching the SSL, it will be necessary to take part in all the stages if we want to stay there. For my part, I do not know if I will take part in eight CSIO

SSL, but the majority undoubtedly. When Rolf says that we will finish in the middle of the classification at the end of season SSL, I find it optimistic. Between winning Zagreb, Lümmen or Buenos Aires, and to be at the forefront in La Baule, Rome, Aachen or St-Gallen, there is a whole world.

Are you left with the ambition to win the Nations' Cup in La Baule?

It is always necessary to leave a winner! But I have no illusions. Between the behavior of the horses indoors and outside, there is a great difference, I wait to see La Toya, No Mercy and Mrs Pompadour in La Baule. As for the fourth member of the team, we will test a new couple at this level of competition. (NB Celine Stauffer, probable number four, won the Grand Prix of CSI*** Arrezzo on 10 April last with Daloubet d' Évordes.)

Who will you ride in La Baule?

I will come to La Baule with La Toya for the Nations' Cup and Grand Prix, and Silver for the Derby. This is a horse that someone entrusted me with three months ago, and who had taken part in the World Cup with Austrian Rob Raskin.

Which other horses are at your disposal for the other stages and the European Championships?

For a top horse, I also have Grannie. From now until the end of May I am going to compete in La Baule, Wiesbaden, Aach and Madrid. At the end of these four competitions, I will choose which horse I will reserve for the European Championship. Still it's necessary that I be selected for the team! Grannie and La Toya are good horses, but they are not in the same category as Tinkas Boy. One does not find a horse like that one every day.

How is he doing?

Following three months at a German clinic, he returns home next week (NB mid-April). I will be able to start riding him towards July and jump at the end of the year. But I want to have 100% reassurance that he wants to and that everything is going well. I do not want to return one day on a ground and have him exit on three legs. In my head I have made a cross above his sporting career. If he still has the will to go on at the end of the year, we will see.

Could you say a word about La Toya?

She is a 10-year-old Belgian mare. She has more qualities than Grannie, but she is also more difficult, hotter. The beginning of the season is going to be a test. We will see if she is a little more settled.

Are you happy to be returning to La Baule?

Yes, because it's a very good event. On the other hand, I am an 'ambassador' for the Longines Elegance class and I will be happy to be able to meet up with the team of this traditional Swiss clockmaker in La Baule.

Interview by Nathalie Fey