

# World Cup Finals as a Stepping Stone

by Holly Grayton

There are two Canadians holding the metaphorical flag for our nation at the 2017 World Cup Jumping Finals, held in Omaha, Nebraska. They are unequivocally doing their country proud, as Christopher Surbey and Kean White turned in two terrific rounds over the first two nights of the Finals.

Surbey and the 15 year old mare Chalacorada (Chalan x Corrado I) finished the opening speed round with one rail down to add 4 penalty seconds to their running time, finishing in 23rd place for the evening. White had a good time aboard For Freedom Z (For Pleasure x Baloubet du Rouet) but two rails added 8 seconds to their time, and they ended the day in 27th.

The second round of competition was a Grand Prix style course, with a jumpoff to break the ties for the evening's winner. White ignited the crowd as he delivered the first rail-free round of the night, picking up just 1 time fault for exceeding the very snug time allowed. Surbey returned just a few horses later and had one unlucky rail (but made the time allowed). The two Canadians finished in the top half of round 2, with White in 9th and Surbey in 16th.



Holly, Chris and Jill World Cup Finals 2017

The last day of the Finals sees the top 30 riders after two rounds come back to jump two separate courses to determine the overall winner. Both Canadians easily qualified in 20th and 21st.

The World Cup Finals is known as the indoor show jumping championship. There is nothing else like it in the world for this reason, but also it is the only major championship whose riders qualify solely on their results. There is no team competition and no subjective selection process. Every rider that competes at the Finals has earned their spot by having results good enough to secure a spot in their respective qualifying league.

This is what makes the event such an important one for athlete development and for top sport – especially in Canada.

It is no secret that Team Canada competes in fewer Nations Cups of all levels than our neighbors to the South, and many fewer than top-flight European teams. There are many good reasons for this (funding, geography, horse power and ownership, number of top riders, etc) but it does affect the development stream for upcoming athletes.

Team Canada has the same important goals as all of the other federations around the world – Olympic Games, World Equestrian Games, our regional games (Pan American Games), and the Nations Cup league final – but with a limited number of team events on the Canadian list each year, there is considerable pressure for each team to perform. This means, more or less, each team that Canada sends out needs to be the best team possible.

Especially over the last few years, Canada has made efforts to send teams on development tours to Europe and South America, because these upcoming riders need experience at this level to move up the ranks into the top teams and vie for spots on the Olympic level teams.

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This development level is crucial for the sport in Canada. It is the athletes' pathway that needs to be part of every serious rider's planning, and must be part of the national federation's long-term strategies.

The World Cup Finals fills a void in this pathway. It is a simple way for developing riders to test their mettle against the best in the world, without getting supplanted by the country's more proven athletes. It should be therefore, cultivated, supported, and promoted by the national federation.

Canadian Olympic veteran Jill Henselwood knows this struggle. Henselwood is passionate about the building blocks toward top sport in Canada.

"I always did the World Cup Finals to improve. There's no appreciation for the fact that you're in the abyss until you're actually on the team, no matter what age – even young riders. There's an event here and available, once a year – why isn't this considered a building block?" Henselwood is in Omaha for the Finals, playing a supporting role for the Canadian riders, specifically for Surbey who brought her in for technical assistance for the week.

Surbey and White have brought their own support teams to the Final – just like a normal show. In contrast other countries represented at the Finals have more structure and financial support, for example a team vet, a chef d'equipe, technical advisors, etc. Surbey and White

are "on an island, trying to get to the mainland," as Henselwood poetically said. There are no Team Canada curtains on the stalls, no Team Canada backpacks for the grooms, no Team Canada t-shirts, stickers, or flags for the riders and their support group – other than what they brought themselves. Not to mention the self-funding to prepare for and travel to the Finals.

Qualifying from the North American league means that it is possible to qualify for the indoor show jumping championship jumping only outdoors. There are some indoor events on the list of qualifying shows, but far from all of them. In order to prepare for the Finals, Surbey and his supportive owners from Team Spruce Meadows, traveled to Europe just a month before the Finals in order

to compete at 5\* level indoor shows. This preparation has so far proven to be invaluable, and it was entirely self-funded. After the first two rounds of the Finals, it was noted 18 of the top 20 riders had been practicing a l m o s t exclusively indoors leading up to the Final s– this is not a coincidence.

To qualify

for and jump in the World Cup Finals is an admirable and impressive feat. It is not 'mission impossible', but it is a big task. There is expertise from across the country that riders can draw from to help with their Finals experience – from grooming, veterinarians, physiotherapy, technical assistance, coaching, logistics, and much more.

Surbey and White are making such a big effort to do something here in Omaha. Their drive and focus is what has brought them here, and it is what will continue their careers to the top of the sport. Team Canada should take notice of their efforts and learn from the experience to be able to build riders for the future and take them from the island to the mainland. 🇩🇪



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