

JUMPING

Like Father, Like Son

Article Camilla Alfthan Photos ©Scoopdyga



Fashion mixed with horses at the third edition of Gucci Masters event in Paris, where Equestrio had a chat with two of its legends who will always be in vogue.

With eight CSI 5* classes and the finals of the IJRC Rolex Top Ten, the Gucci Masters had top riders mingling with amateurs as well as showjumping celebrities in an exciting and action-packed programme. As the final leg of the Masters series, the Paris event was as always an unusual one where fashion mixed with horses. While Gucci's chief designer, Frida Giannini celebrated the house's 90th anniversary with a pop-up store and a total of €300,000 in prize money, the Belgian tailor Scabal had collaborated with Kevin Staut to launch a new line of made-to-measure riding clothes. Meanwhile, the 40th Salon du Cheval in the adjoining building had drawn some 150,000 people which added a constant buzz to the place. Two of the main forces behind the Masters event were the showjumping legends, Nelson and Rodrigo Pessoa. Equestrio had a chat with the duo in between some of the classes.

Esthetics are an important part of showjumping and here people are really expanding on it with clothing stores, designer tack and even a hairdresser. What do you think about it all?

Nelson: They are trying to do it like entertainment. Competition is now changing in step with the times, so when it begins at eight or nine in the morning and

goes on until midnight you need other activities so people don't get bored. Four years ago you had two international competitions with the top riders and then it was finished. Now it's different; you have the amateurs, the two stars and then the one stars, so all this entertainment becomes a necessary part of events.

In the 1960s when you left your native Brazil for Paris, you could not have imagined this evolution?

N: At that time showjumping was really for amateurs at the riding clubs and only during the weekends, but never in a public place.

Rodrigo: Nowadays, there are more people involved, not just professionals but also amateurs, owners, children... It's an opportunity to bring everybody together and have a good weekend. For us it's less comfortable as timing is more difficult. You don't want to ride at eight in the morning or at midnight but that's the way the market is today and you have to please a lot of different people. It's up to the show organizers to decide how they want to do it.

Why do you think it changed so much?

R: The sport has changed a lot because of the media. In the old days it was not so intense but now the media are strongly present. There's a big demand, but that in



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turn implies promotion of the sport. The sport is better now, but it is less well attended than in the older days. Now there are events every weekend, and so many more sports to follow that it has dispersed the public a little bit. Before there was far less to choose from. Now there are three or four events every weekend so people will choose the one they prefer or that is closer to their home. Neco, you stopped before it all changed.

N: I began competing internationally in the 1960s and came here when I was young in my twenties in 1961. I stopped about ten years ago. I competed on a big level in 1998 in the World Championships in Rome and then a little bit more. It was a little bit difficult to maintain two stables at a high level for both me and Rodrigo.

You left your career to focus on your son.

How was it for you, Rodrigo, to live up to that?

R: The expectations were always there, that's something I've always had to deal with. We were lucky to

compete together at a high level for eight-nine years, so that was a really nice opportunity to spend a lot of time together.

Wasn't there ever any rivalry between you?

R: Not really. You always try to work together to try to solve the problems and move ahead. Today, I'm very focused to compete on a high level and to stay there. It is very difficult to get your horses to do this. My father teaches younger people who don't have the same experience which is very valuable for them in order to bring them forward.

N: A lot of students come from abroad to ride with us and to learn from our experience and management. For some it is not enough to compete in jumping. Some prefer dealing, which is not our thing, or they want to teach or organize shows. The sport has grown a lot; it is more professional and the number of people who ride are tenfold.

You made history when you won the World Cup three times in a row, you've won Olympic gold, and that's just some of it. Hasn't your meteoric start added a lot of pressure?

R: It is never less pressure. It made some things easier the counterpart is that expectations are always there and you are not really excused when you make mistakes. But that is merely public opinion and you have to set it aside and not make a big deal of it.

Do mistakes ever keep you awake at night?

R: You can't let it affect you that much because you compete a lot, and if you are more on the losing end than in the winning circle you have to know how to progress and not make a big thing about defeats. Correct your mistakes so as to do better next time. It's a hectic schedule when you travel all over the world.

N: We travelled a little bit less. Now riders can do 52 shows in a year. But your ambition and the number of horses are more or less the same.

R: Now we try to give back to the sport what it has given to us. You don't make money with horse shows. But you really want to please the people as much as

possible. It's important to have good shows on the circuit and everybody does their shift, so we're trying to make our best.

You also launched a clothing label.

At which level are you involved with it?

R: I try to follow it. There's a lot of competition in that area. Anky and Isabell Werth were among the first to have their own labels. We try to focus on a younger and broader generation with affordable products. We will see how it evolves. Anything that has your name on it has to be to exactly what you are and how you want to be represented.

Your lives revolve around the horses.

You moved to Brussels with your horses, and you even have your own vet station at the farm...

N: We live in Belgium because it is a horse country and Brussels is a nice, small town which is very central with good access to other shows, which is important as we're on the road such a lot.

R: Breeding is a hobby and it's not really our thing. But with the vet station we are really involved as the



health of the horse is extremely important. There are no other secrets than to keep them healthy both physically and mentally.

N: The horsemanship is very important, and in this area things haven't really changed. Even if there's been a substantial evolution, a horse is a horse. What we learned 50 years ago is still the same today.

What were your favorite horses?

N: I had a group of good ones in my career that Rodrigo also competed with. Baloubet, Special Envoy, Tomboy, Grand Geste, Spartaco... they are the ones we keep in our hearts for life.

Why are you not in this edition of the Gucci Masters?

R: I had a tough year with injuries and the horse I had was a little bit tired and not really up to performing, so I gave him an early rest. Next year will be a big because of the Olympics and before that there are still a lot of shows. He had quite a good season up to now and wasn't going to improve anything these last couple of weeks. I'll start the first three months of the new year in Florida and then the horse is going home. We have a couple of new horses that we want to get on the road and ready for the season when we get back to Europe in May. Then we'll try to get ready for the games which are already at the end of July.

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Do you follow your son in all the big shows?

N: Yes, more or less. The World Championships, the European Championships and here...and then I want to be at home for the students.

You're not itching to get on a horse, or feel that you could do it better?

N: No, I changed jobs and now I see it differently. I also come to see other people. We are not a camp.

Rodrigo, will you eventually follow in your father's footsteps?

R: It depends what the opportunities are when I decide I won't compete on a high level anymore. But I definitely do something with horses as it is our passion and our field of expertise. ■