

HONG KONG TATLER

The Spirit of High Society

November 2014

Diving Belle


FOUR-TIME OLYMPIC CHAMPION
GUO JINGJING ON THE FORTUITOUS
MISTAKE THAT LAUNCHED HER DIVING CAREER,
THE STRESS OF FAME AND THE JOY OF RAISING
A FAMILY WITH HUSBAND KENNETH FOK



I'M SIPPING A GLASS OF CHAMPAGNE BARONS DE ROTHSCHILD

and rubbing shoulders with Bloombergs, Springsteens, Agassis and Rockefellers in the VIP spectators' lounge of the inaugural Longines Los Angeles Masters. Suddenly, the stadium's steady hum of chatter, clinking of glasses and polite palm-clapping escalates into whistles and cheers as Jennifer Gates—daughter of Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates—canters into the arena dressed as a racecar driver.





All the PRETTY HORSES

America's most powerful joined the equine elite for one of the most spectacular events on the showjumping calendar—the hair-raising Longines Los Angeles Masters. MADELEINE ROSS reports from the arena

Photography **JOHNNY BUZZERIO**

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Gates has joined the fray of famous names who are competing in the Los Angeles Masters' Charity Pro-Am—a crowd-pleasing race in which colourful, costume-clad celebrity amateurs team up with professional showjumpers to complete a fence-peppered relay in the name of philanthropy.

Next up are the Pink Ladies from *Grease*, cowboys and Indians, and even Las Vegas showgirls. Jessica Springsteen, daughter of rock legend Bruce Springsteen and a champion rider in her own right, dons hippie garb as she and her partner speed around the ring, casting daisies into the audience. Themed music accompanies each ride and sends the distinguished audience into fits of singing along. It's a thrilling, delightful affair and a fun, frisky foil to the event's otherwise elegant and sophisticated tone.



HORSING AROUND From left: Longines Los Angeles Masters Grand Prix victors Steve Guerdat, Jos Verlooy and Georgina Bloomberg; US rider Karl Cook and his horse Ferrari

Welcome to day three of the Longines Los Angeles Masters—one in a trilogy of annual indoor showjumping Grand Slams, which also includes the Gucci Paris Masters and the Longines Hong Kong Masters. This four-day event has transformed the Los Angeles Convention Centre into a hub of equine beauty and extravagance and lured racing royalty and high society from all corners of the globe.

The Masters occupies two arenas: the competition stadium itself and a vast main hall that houses the warm-up paddock and extensive red-carpeted facilities for visitors—a bar, various casual dining options, a lounge area, numerous leathers goods boutiques, spectacular sculptures and a stage with constant live music. Harlequin entertainers weave through the main hall on stilts.

As we enter we're drawn immediately to the warm-up paddock, which sits centre stage. Sleek stallions in shades of chestnut and ebony trot around the ring, rehearsing their leaps for the impending challenges. I find myself gripping the barricade to watch, mesmerised, as these massive, majestic



DRESSING THE PART

It wasn't all speed dashes and fence-jumping at the Los Angeles Masters. In between the main events, audiences were treated to beguiling and dramatic performances by classical dressage maestro Clémence Faivre.

Faivre, who will also be performing at the Longines Hong Kong Masters in February, is a world-famous "trick rider" who performs the art of haute école—a discipline that focuses on maximising a horse's mental and physical abilities while establishing deep understanding and dialogue between equine and rider. The horse, throughout all training and performances, remains free of constraints and physical coercion.

In period costume, Faivre rides into the arena without reins, her horse's long, chestnut mane fluttering freely like the fabled hair of Rapunzel. Melodramatic music and a sea of purple light create a fantastical setting for the ensuing series of tricks, which include trotting backwards, jumping left and right on cue, and dancing on hind legs for an astonishing length of time.

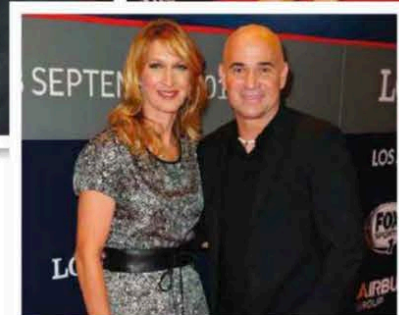




JOY RIDE From left: Jessica Springsteen dressed as a hippie during the Charity Pro-Am; stilt walkers entertain guests in the main hall



STAR POWER Clockwise from above: Jane Richard Philips (left) and her Charity Pro-Am partner, Tiffany Sullivan, as showgirls; Ariana Rockefeller; Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi; Bruce Springsteen



beasts launch themselves off their bony, twig-like legs and project their giant bodies over fences that stand taller than me. At such close range you can see their taunted muscles ripple, and hear them snort and nicker as they pound the sandy, fibrous surface beneath them. It's a wondrous introduction to the event, sure to beguile even those who have no prior knowledge of the sport.

During the four-day equestrian extravaganza, there are some competitions—or classes, as they are referred to in horse-speak—that are considered unmissable. One is the Longines Speed Challenge. Eager to catch every moment, I arrive early as the previous class is ending. Suddenly the lights dim in the racing arena and, in an instant, a swarm of industrious course groomers are zipping around the ring, combing the trampled surface and erecting slim vertical fences as well as wider, more intimidating hurdles known as oxers. Once the course is set, the riders flood into the arena on foot, pacing around the winding course and counting the number of footsteps between each fence. This will help them gauge the time their horse has between each jump.

Then things kick off. One after the other, 47 of the world's most decorated showjumpers gallop and weave their way through a series of hairpin bends. The audience holds its breath before every leap, breaks into concerned "ooohs" when a horse falters and bursts into relieved, roaring cheers when a

rider clears an obstacle. Jane Richard Philips, a petite 31-year old Swiss rider, stuns everyone with a lightning round and triumphs to be crowned winner.

It's fascinating to observe the chemistry between the horses and their riders. After every round, even if their horse staged a tantrum and refused to jump, the rider leans forward and lovingly rubs the neck of their steed as if to say "Good job." While training and physical fitness is critical in showjumping, much of this sport is mental, both for the rider and the horse.

Success ultimately rides on the strength of bond between the two.

"Sometimes the bond isn't immediate, but we work everyday with our horses; we spend a lot of time with them," says French rider Patrice Delaveau, who dominated the Hong Kong Masters earlier this year, winning four of the six competitions. So far his results at the LA Masters haven't been as stellar. "It's just like

a personal relationship—sometimes you have to work at it, sometimes it's like love at first sight, but the bond can develop and strengthen over years and years."

Kevin Staut, a handsome French Olympian who is also here to compete, agrees. "You must try to have a good relationship with the horse—to make the horse trust you. Otherwise, I think there's no chance to attain superb results."

On the final day of the Masters, the stadium is a full house. Everyone has come to watch the Longines Grand Prix, where riders compete over two rounds for the US\$475,000 purse. Fences are set at the maximum height of 1.6 metres. The final

winner is determined by accumulated penalties in the first round, then the fastest time in the second round.

Everyone is on the edge of their seats to see if Delaveau, who won the 2013 Longines Hong Kong Masters Grand Prix, will repeat his feat in the City of Angels. This time, however, it's a rising star, 19-year old Belgian Jos Verlooy, who soars into first place, followed by Swiss powerhouse Steve Guerdat in second place, and Georgina Bloomberg, the daughter of former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, in third.

Next up on the calendar is the Gucci Paris Masters in December, followed by the 2015 Longines Hong Kong Masters, which will take place from February 13 to 15 at AsiaWorld-Expo and promises to be a similarly grand affair. Dozens of the world's best riders, many of whom competed in LA, have already confirmed their trips to the Fragrant Harbour.

Staut, who just misses out on a top spot today, is an avid supporter of the equestrian Grand Slam. "These events are fantastic for our sport. Showjumping is still considered a little

sport and competitions like these really help us develop our popularity. The Masters show the best of equestrianism—here you have a mix of glamour, beautiful things, art and top sports people. A lot of riders come here with their best horses, which proves it's a big deal. I'm truly happy to have the opportunity to ride in this type of competition." 🐾



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HOME TURF

The second edition of the Longines Hong Kong Masters promises to bring all the glitz and glamour of equestrianism to Asia's World City

Dust off your most fashionable jodhpurs, blazers and riding boots in preparation for the local instalment of the equestrian grand slam. The Longines Hong Kong Masters will light up AsiaWorld-Expo from

February 13 to 15, as 25 of the world's most talented showjumpers compete for US\$1 million in prize money. Expect a brilliant array of entertainment including equestrian shows, live music performances,

autograph sessions, art talks, educational clinics and fine dining from chef Yves Mattagne of the two-Michelin-starred Sea Grill Restaurant in Brussels. For tickets, visit mastersgrandslam.com