



ADEQUAN® GLOBAL DRESSAGE FESTIVAL

# AGDF TIMES

WEEK 8 • FEBRUARY 26, 2026



# A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



I still haven't recovered from last week. I'm not conceding to the rigorous schedule of the winter season in Wellington; I'm celebrating the energy felt throughout AGDF 7, which is still slightly electrifying.

Here's some of my favorite moments:

1. When Isabell Werth said this in the Friday Night Stars press conference: "I didn't expect that it would be like this. There's a huge improvement in the whole environment here—the horses, the riding—which is great to see. We have to make dressage more global and for sure here there is a lot of energy and enthusiasm, which I love to see and be a part of. I'm

pretty sure that I'll come back next year."

It would be our pleasure, Isabell. See you in 2027! *Flip to page 4 to read more about Isabell's week in Florida.*

2. The moment Jordan LaPlaca made me laugh out loud during an interview when he said: "Gold Play is a very high-powered horse with a lot of energy, and we work a lot on decaffeinating him and trying to keep it all harmonious and easy."

I'll be adding "decaffeinating" to my press release dictionary moving forward.

Also, when asked if he's invited, would he compete in

Europe this summer, Jordan said, "Heck yeah, why not. I've waited my whole life to get here, so I'm not stopping now. The world's my oyster and I'm just waiting to figure out where it's taking me."

You're a breath of fresh air, Jordan. *Flip to page 14 to read more about his winning week.*

If you only have time for one page in this week's Times, stop what you're doing and go directly to page 16 for a healthy dose of leadline charm brought to you by Zen Elite Equestrian. You won't regret it...

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All the best,  
**Lindsay Brock**  
Editor



# NOTHING ELSE

# COMPARES

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# ISABELL WERTH



BRINGS A SPECIAL BLEND OF RIDING MAGIC TO HEADLINE FREESTYLE NIGHT WITH OVER 82%

By Alice Collins for Wellington International

German dressage megastar Isabell Werth stamped her own brand of riding magic on the Zen Elite Equestrian FEI Dressage World Cup™ Grand Prix Freestyle, producing a mesmerizing 82.66% performance.

She and Special Blend 3 were making their CDI freestyle debut during the 'Friday Night Stars' sold-out evening.

Flipping the second and third places from the qualifying

grand prix class, Brittany Fraser-Beaulieu landed the runner-up spot with a massive new personal best on Jill Irving's 12-year-old, Jaccardo. The Desperado x Jazz gelding scored

79.25% with a high-energy, maximum throttle performance. Ecuadorian rider Julio Mendoza Loor finished third, meaning the top three athletes represented three different continents. Mendoza Loor rode his 2024 Paris Olympics mount Jewel's Goldstrike to 78.165%. Riders from six different nations filled the top six places in the high-scoring class.

Special Blend 3, who is still registered to former owner Helgstrand Dressage but was recently sold to Werth's student Natalie Stickling-Morzynski, belied his inexperience in the freestyle, dancing enthusiastically to a classical compilation originally designed for Werth's Olympic team gold medal-winning horse, Emilio.

Special Blend only got the call-up to fly to Florida a few days before the show after Werth's intended horse, DSP Quantaz, got a small swelling on one leg.

"This freestyle is really, really difficult and I was not sure what Special would do because he's not experienced in these kinds of atmospheres, but he was very focused," said Werth, who was delighted to hear 2,000 spectators clapping along to her final centerline. "This crowd was so supportive and started to clap, which is something special. That end to a test is a feeling I really enjoy, and it's how you know why you're still in the saddle in a competition."

Werth's test showcased a full



piaffe pirouette right after the entry halt and 22 one-time changes on a curving line between canter pirouettes. It was a masterclass in her signature fusion of extreme technical difficulty and jaw-dropping ease of execution. Hundreds of people were filming her performance on their phones, and then showed their appreciation with a standing ovation.

"I'd like to thank the show team because it was pretty impressive here," continued the seven-time Olympian, who last competed in Wellington a decade and a half ago. "I didn't expect that it would be like this. There's a huge improvement in the whole environment here—the horses, the riding—which is great to see. We have to make dressage more global and for sure here there is a lot of energy and enthusiasm, which I love to see and be a part of. I'm pretty sure that I'll come

back next year."

Fraser-Beaulieu entered the arena on a mission to finish as the highest-placed rider in the FEI Dressage World Cup™ - North American League in her quest to qualify for the Final in Texas in April—and achieved it with aplomb. She punched the air in delight on completion of her Britney Spears-themed freestyle put together by Tom Hunt.

"I couldn't leave anything hanging because I had a lot on the line," said Fraser-Beaulieu, who trains with Ashley Holzer. "This was Jac's first Friday night, and he'd never been into an atmosphere like this, so I was a bit nervous because there were so many people, but he came into the arena and was like, 'Let's go!'. He was on my aids the whole time."

Last-minute tweaks to her floorplan added to Fraser-Beaulieu's apprehension, but the test came together

beautifully, with 16 one-time changes down the centerline and piaffe between the two walk sections.

"This was the first time I actually went through the newer pattern," she admitted. "I just wanted to be on my music, mistake-free, and show power. I think I accomplished that today. Jill and Ashley insisted on the Britney [Spears] music, and I was a little shy about it at first, but everybody seems to like it, and the crowd gets involved."

Mendoza Loor—who became the first rider ever to represent Ecuador at the Olympics in 2024—wiped away a tear and pointed down at Jewel's Goldstrike in gratitude after his final halt.

"Riding 'Goldie' is a joy every time," said the rider from Columbus, NC, who co-owns the Bretton Woods 15-year-old gelding with his wife Jessica Mendoza. "I paid \$20

for this horse, and he's taken me to the Olympics, taken me here—and every time he gives me 100%. He never lets me down, and that's why I cry all the time because this horse has made me who I am. There aren't enough words to explain how good he is and how much I love him."

Heidi Humphries, owner of Zen Elite Equestrian, said, "On behalf of the entire Zen Elite Equestrian family, we extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who has come out to support such an incredible week of top sport at AGDF. From the riders and owners to the grooms, sponsors, organizers, and passionate fans in the stands, your energy made this evening a truly unforgettable one. Congratulations to Isabell and all the other competitors for delivering a beautiful night of top sport under the lights."



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in GDF's Vendor Court



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PICTURED RIGHT: DUENDE



# WILD AT HEART: A LOOK INTO CARA VL

Cara VL has had a lifelong obsession with horses; when they were no longer a part of her life everything became disoriented.

At the age of nine, Cara began taking riding lessons and eventually found true love competing in the jumper ring. The stable taught Cara discipline and order, something sorely missing in her home life. Her barn rat friends became family and the horses offered the peace and kindness she longed for.

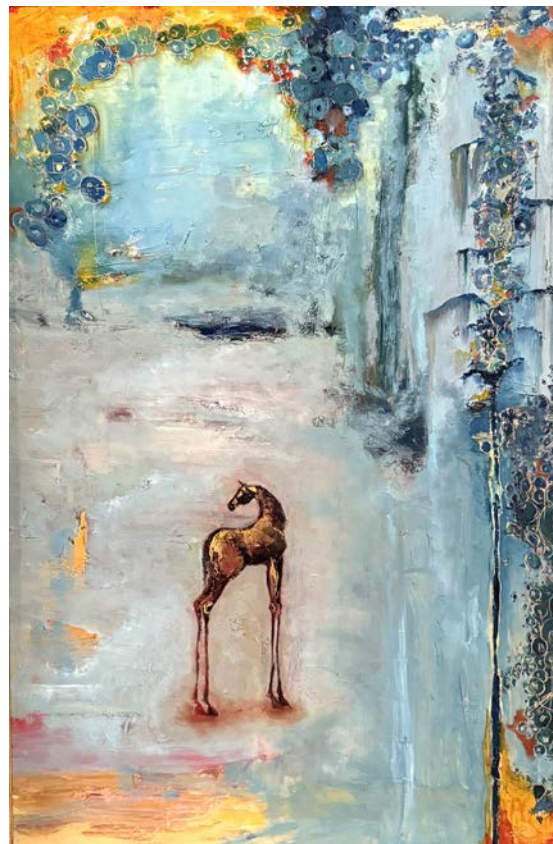
This magical life with horses seemingly ended when Cara left her hometown of Ft. Wayne, IN to study photojournalism at Western Kentucky University and sold her beloved horse. She performed remarkably well with a camera, earning numerous awards including The Alexia as well as interning at newspapers throughout the country. Always a creative, Cara not only relied heavily on photography but also breakdancing and graffiti to keep her soul full. However, the loss of horses was marked.

In the chaos of the 2008 recession, she moved to one of the last un rehabbed lofts

in downtown St Louis; it was full of artists who encouraged her to paint. In 2011 Cara created her first painting, a 6'x6' of two horses embracing. The only work she could find was as a carriage driver which reunited her with horses and reignited the passion that had been dormant for far too long.

Today Cara is a full-time artist, painting horses in thick, layered oils. Her paintings begin with antique frames which are gingerly restored. Boards are cut to fit with the framing being an integral part of the finished piece. Horses are depicted with exceptionally long legs,

PICTURED RIGHT: EVEN COWGIRLS GET THE BLUES



reflecting their fragility and the fragility of life. The backgrounds are often simple in nature, showcasing a laser focus on the subject matter. A variety of techniques and tools are

used to achieve hyper texture and are inspired by a true passion for process in both painting and horse training. Glazing, layering, and thinned paint along with the use of brushes, pallet



PICTURED LEFT: WILD AT HEART  
PICTURED RIGHT: POETIC MOVES

knives, and fingers lend to the canvas' depth and movement.

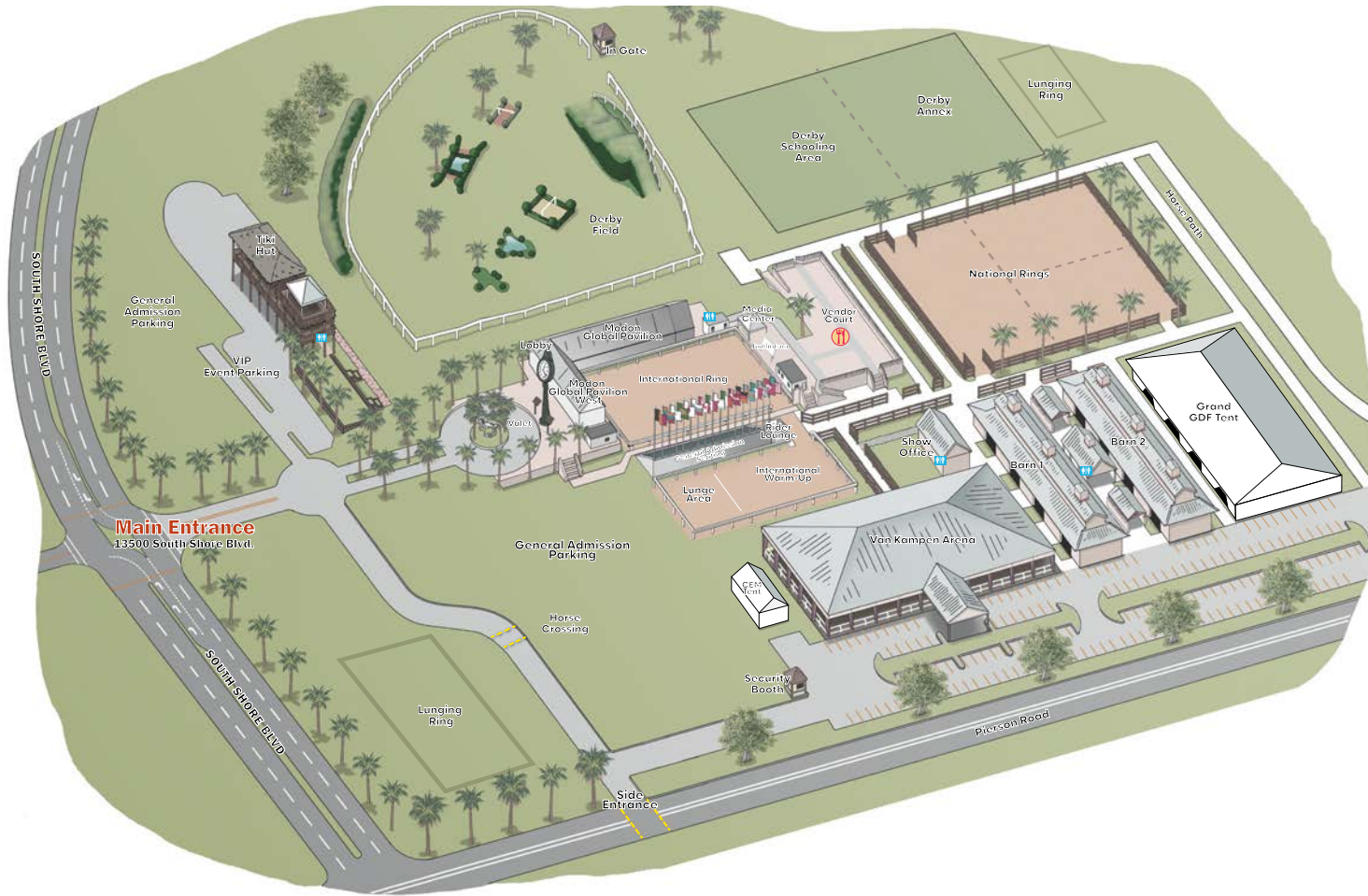
Cara is based in Williston FL, outside Ocala on a small ranch with two horses, a three legged dog and two

barn cats that reside inside her home.



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# SPECIAL AWARDS



Hemp Bedding.Org's "Auboise Top Pick Award" went to **Devon Kane** riding **Vamos...** on her birthday! The pair topped their weekend with 71.900% in the CDI Grand Prix Musical Freestyle.



Congratulations to the **Garaman Lusitanos Achievement Award** winner, **Jorge Arauz** riding **London Do Vouga**, this pair also won the FEI National Grand Prix Special with a 65.904%. Owner Dulce Borjas accepted the award.



Carol Cohen-Hodess presented the **3 Graces Achievement Award** to **Isabell Werth** aboard **Special Blend**. The No. 2 rider in the world, piloted Special Blend to the win in the CDI Grand Prix and won Friday night's CDI Grand Prix Freestyle with a commanding 82.660%



The **Omega Alpha Healthy Horse Award** winner was **Donatello DC** owned and shown by **Judy Sloan** this pair also won the FEI National Grand Prix AA class on Thursday. Coach and Omega Alpha Ambassador Katherine Bateson-Chandler joined in the presentation.



Isabell Werth earned AGDF 7's Leading Lady Freestyle Rider Award, sponsored by **Frank & Eileen**.



The **N2 Saddlery Peak Performance Award** went to **Carolyn Woodring**, who rode her **Pool Boy** to the win in the YR JR Third Level Test Three. Carolyn's trainer Hannah Owens assisted in the presentation.

## STILLPOINT FARM LEADING INTERNATIONAL FREESTYLE RIDER STANDINGS

1	SUSAN PAPE GBR	14PTS
2	CAROLINE DARCOURT SWE	12PTS
3	CHRISTIAN SIMONSON USA	10PTS
	PABLO GÓMEZ MOLINA ESP	10PTS
	ISABELL WERTH GER	10PTS

# EDWARD GAL FINDS FRESH FIRE

By Alice Collins for Wellington International



Edward Gal, the darling of Dutch dressage who became a global megastar during his groundbreaking and record-setting years with the inimitable black stallion Totilas, is reframing his relationship to the sport, having taken a few years out of the CDI ring. This season, his new collaboration with the family-owned Italian luxury lifestyle brand Stefano Ricci, has the legendary Olympic medalist fired up anew.

The new collection, the SR Equestrian Line, was unveiled at the massive November 2025 Fieracavalli horse fair in Verona, Italy. It merges high-end Italian craftsmanship with top-tier equestrian functionality and complements the brand's existing skiing, golf, and running lines. This winter, the Stefano Ricci ambassador visited the Adequan® Global Dressage Festival (AGDF) and, much like the German superstar Isabell Werth who competed in AGDF 7, Gal is now talking about the

impressive global reach of the Wellington dressage scene, how it is helping shape the future of the sport, and why he's already planning his return.

"It's cold in Holland at the moment, and in Florida the weather is super," said the 55-year-old with his trademark grin. "The value of Wellington to dressage internationally keeps on growing. A lot of people out of Europe want to visit for a few weeks or maybe months. What's special is that you can train with top trainers and you can ride a lot of competitions without having to travel a lot.

"In Europe, we spend a lot of time on the road with the horses, which is not so nice. In Wellington, you can finish your competition and have the horse back in its stall at home right away, which is great for them mentally and physically."

And then there's the famous International Arena at AGDF, a ring that many up-and-

coming riders picture in their minds as the place they want to one day show.

"For some horses it's an intense arena," continued Gal. "But AGDF allows you to get in there over and over so that they can get used to it and to bigger atmospheres

in general. In Europe, it's quite difficult to practice in those kinds of arenas—you only find them at the big tournaments. So, the development opportunities for horses in Wellington are top."

One particularly familiar

PHOTOS ©ASHLEY NEUHOF

horse caught his eye during his visit: his compatriot Emmelie Scholtens was the former rider of Indian Rock, now a star on this side of the pond with Christian Simonson. Other horses Gal knew were also competing at AGDF—across both the CDI and national rings—and he approves of the U.S. riding and care they are receiving.

"They were all looking good, and it's great that they have nice riders and get to spend the winter in this climate," added Gal, who was inundated with requests to return and coach some of the many dressage riders based in Wellington.

The exclusive environment that Wellington fosters for dressage riders is something Stefano Ricci is looking to tap into, offering a full line of equipment, products, and tack—including bespoke items.

The collection benefits from the technical expertise of Michaela Ricci, a grand prix dressage rider based in Italy. She trains with Gal, which is



how he became involved in the project. Ricci's desire to enhance dressage didn't end with choosing fabrics and designing boots; the vision is to bring top level dressage to Verona as part of the 2026 Fieracavalli in November, which currently hosts a CSI5\* FEI Jumping World Cup™ qualifier. With Gal's help, that lofty goal is solidifying into reality. The Stefano Ricci Top 10 Dressage Award will bring together riders from across

the globe in a prestigious invitational class, who will all vie for the enormous solid silver trophy.

"Stefano Ricci is an exclusive brand, and they also want to do an exclusive tournament," explained Gal, who is enthusiastic about working with a high-quality brand seeking to elevate dressage's profile and broaden its reach. "There was no dressage at this huge show, and we want to bring it there and offer good prizes and prizemoney. It's so nice that Stefano Ricci wants to support dressage like this and bring this positivity to the sport.

"It's such a fun collaboration," continued Gal, who is energized from his trip to Wellington thanks to the dose of winter sun. "The Stefano Ricci products are so nice, and they have everything you could think of. It was super to be able to

show that to everyone in Wellington."

Gal is keen to return to Florida next season, and plans are already underway.

"Balancing time away from my stable in Holland is tricky, but I'm thinking about how to do that," he concluded. "I'm not sure if it will be a few short trips or one longer one—we will see. All things are possible."

For a rider whose career has already reshaped modern dressage, Gal's next chapter—through his work with Stefano Ricci, the prospect of bringing top-level dressage to Verona, or a possible return to Wellington's rings—looks set to continue to be groundbreaking.





# RISING DUO JORDAN LAPLACA AND GOLD PLAY

GLITTER IN PLUS-70%  
GRAND PRIX SPECIAL

In Gold Play's second-ever CDI Special, Jordan LaPlaca (USA) coaxed an unhurried, harmonious and assured performance from the inexperienced 11-year-old gelding to post their first plus-70% CDI score the Dutta Corp CDI3\* Grand Prix Special. The duo made their international big tour debut in February 2026 and, just a month later, they topped the podium twice during the seventh week of AGDF.

It was a U.S. one-two-three, with local rider Kevin Kohmann—who was born in Germany but switched codes in 2021 to ride under the

same flag as his wife Devon Kane—finished second. He rode Equine Law Group's 15-year-old Floriscount gelding, Famous, to 68.34%. Second to go in the class of eight starters, Bianka Berkold and her own 13-year-old Charmeur mare, Imperial, held onto the third spot with 66.298%.

LaPlaca and Gold Play's score was trending around 72%, but mistakes in both lines of one-time changes garnered marks as low as 3.5, pegging the score back. His high score of 72.447% came from the seasoned German judge Katrina Wüst, hinting at

the Grey Flanell x Sir Donnerhall II gelding's substantial future scoring potential. Their final score of 70.425% eclipsed their only other CDI Grand Prix Special result by more than two percentage points.

"Breaking 70% was so exciting!" enthused the Connecticut-based trainer, who is also an FEI driving competitor and whose horses also benefit from an all-around education. "You always strive to be better and better, and as that starts to unfold, it's that much more rewarding. This is just the beginning of what I believe this horse can do.

"He trusts me implicitly, and I trust him," he continued. "This season, I've gained more and more trust in the ring with him. I've had him since he was a baby [after finding him at Hof Kasselmann in Germany as a four-year-old], but being in the big ring is a totally different pool. I've never had a bond with a horse like I have with him. When he kicks into the piaffe/passage and realizes it's game on, I feel like time is stopping. That's something special with a horse."

LaPlaca has help from his mentor Albrecht Heidemann, and also trains with U.S. Dressage Team Chef d'Equipe, Christine Traurig. He splits his time between Ledyard, Conn., and Loxahatchee, Fla. Gold Play's younger years were spent hacking, galloping and hauling to various facilities to



acclimate to working anywhere. That groundwork has paid off, as the cauldron-like atmosphere at AGDF did not intimidate him.

LaPlaca placed the blame for the mistakes in the changes squarely on his own shoulders, saying, "That was all me. I got complacent and stopped riding because I was thinking, 'Oh, he's going so nice!' I'm still trying to find the balance of how to keep the harmony alongside the corrections and the education in the test. It's all a process, and I take my hat off to 'GP' for putting up with me with it."

Gold Play will now have a couple of weeks off while LaPlaca formulates a plan for the rest of the year. He hopes it will include the USEF Dressage National

Championship in Ocala in May. With his scores trending upward, LaPlaca has put himself on the selectors' radar for the squad of U.S. riders who travel to Europe each summer. Would he take that opportunity if it arises?

"Heck yeah, why not?" laughed the 37-year-old, who credits his wife Caitlin's dedication and

organization, as well as his assistant trainer Kathleen Cronk for facilitating this dream. "I've waited my whole life to get here, so I'm not stopping now. The world's my oyster and I'm just waiting to figure out where it's taking me."





# ZEN ELITE EQUESTRIAN LEADLINE



# AROUND THE GROUNDS

From the Wellington International Photography Collective





# STEFFI WIEGARD: FROM A GERMAN OFFICE TO FRIDAY NIGHT STARS

Contributed by Sarah Eakin/  
Paper Horse Media  
in collaboration with  
HorseGrooms

Icnic German equestrian Isabell Werth's return to the Global Dressage Festival after a 15-year absence could not have gone better - but it could easily have been a different story, as her groom Steffi Wiegard knows well. When plans to bring DSP Quantaz - a mainstay of Werth's stable - fell through because the horse had a swollen hind leg, Werth had to switch horses midstream.

Special Blend 3, the assigned substitute, meant a hefty rethink in the days before departure from Germany to Wellington and Wiegard

knew they were heading into uncharted territory. "It was a little risky to take [Quantaz] over," said Wiegard, "so we switched to Special Blend. I had to clip him quickly and he was flying for the first time, so I was a little worried. But he made it and he was amazing."

Wiegard has worked for Werth for some 14 years - and been grooming horses for almost 40 - but she balances grooming for Werth at her barn in Rheinberg with an office job at a large DIY company in Münster. "From Monday to Wednesday, I work in a different city, in an office," she said. "Then I leave on Wednesday evening, go to Isabell's place to work

there with the horses."

For Werth's much anticipated and highly publicized return to show in Wellington, Wiegard took some vacation time to allow her to attend. Regardless of last minute changes to the planning, transporting horses is never simple. "People don't think about the blood tests and the paperwork, and this is a lot," said Wiegard. Even the basics - like feed and hay - become complicated. "You cannot bring your own food and your own hay. This is really tricky. Not all horses are fine for that," she said. "But he [Special Blend] was eating well, he loves the hay here, and he's really uncomplicated. I didn't know this before, that

he was that easy."

The horse's ability to cope with the Friday Night Stars contest under the lights in front of an enthused capacity crowd, was also uncertain - the pair were also debuting a complex Freestyle. "We didn't know in this floodlight freestyle how he would react," said Wiegard. "There was a lot of atmosphere and such a big audience." A training session in the main arena, under the lights, to test the waters earlier in the week had done little to allay those fears. "On Wednesday evening we took him into the arena and he was a little nervous and tense, so we thought, 'Oh my

goodness."

Thursday saw a daylight opening performance for the pair as they won the FEI Dressage World Cup Grand Prix. It was a taste of what was to come. "Seeing her in the warm-up, there were already so many people watching," said Wiegard. "For me, she was like a pop star."

Friday night came along and Special Blend exceeded expectations - Werth took home the win in the FEI Dressage World Cup Grand Prix Freestyle. "In the end, he was really with her [Isabell]," said Wiegard. "That was super - it was impressive." The crowd's enthusiasm spilled over in the final stages of the test as they began clapping in time with the musical

score. "Sometimes the horse is scared, afraid of the noise. But he loved it," said Wiegard.

The hype surrounding the German rider does not affect her personality. "She's so grounded," Wiegard said. "She's a normal person and loves her job so much. That's why she's still going on. When you have something, you can ask. She always tries to help."

Werth plans to return to Global next winter and Wiegard will be part of that journey too. This visit was her first time working in Florida having only ever previously been to the state on vacation. She is looking forward to returning - the Wellington environment impressed her. "It's so professional, everything with

the stewards and the facilities there. I have to say it was really good," she said.

Wiegard was the recipient of the \$500 Grooms Award, a modern-day addition to the prize ceremony reflecting the increasing acknowledgement of grooms in the industry. Wiegard welcomes the

change. "There's always something to say and to change, but I have to say it's super now for grooms," she said. "I hope it will stay like this and get better."

## About HorseGrooms

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