

ROOKIE ON A ROLL: Stephanie Rhodes-Bosch

By Karen Robinson



On Sunday, April 25, 2010, Stephanie Rhodes-Bosch achieved a personal milestone of a magnitude that most riders would never dare dream of: with her 12-year-old selle français/thoroughbred-cross gelding, Port Authority, Stephanie placed fifth at Rolex Kentucky, one of only a small handful of annual CC14* events held worldwide. Her placing represents the best Canadian result since Rolex became a four-star event in 1998 – but that’s not all. This was Stephanie’s first four-star, which puts her in the category of rookie. As the highest-placed rookie at this year’s Rolex, Stephanie was awarded a \$1,000 HSBC training grant. She is probably the highest placed rookie in the history of Rolex, and at 21 years of age, she is certainly the youngest Canadian ever to achieve that level of success at a four-star event. And Stephanie’s many months of preparation for Rolex also paid off in another way, when the BC-bred Port Authority received the prestigious Best Conditioned Horse Award.

In the days following Rolex, Stephanie discovered that when you achieve a goal this big, it doesn’t fade away quickly; the usual anti-climax of post-competition was replaced by a much more gratifying emotion.

“It’s taking a while to sink in, and I’m getting a little more excited every day,” she said a few days after the event. Stephanie’s excitement is also kept alive by the next big thing she hopes to have on her calendar – the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games.

When Stephanie and Port Authority, who is better known as ‘Ollie’ around the barn, arrived at the Kentucky Horse Park on the Monday before Rolex, Stephanie knew that the expectations were high, both from herself and from the outside.

“I went there hoping to be in the top ten,” she says. “I’ve been dealing with pressure from outside for a long time now. Going into Rolex, I did feel under pressure to be in the top ten. It was said to me several times.”

Previous results both this spring and in 2009 gave her coach and supporters every reason to expect that Stephanie and Port Authority would do well. Consistent performances at the three star level in 2009 continued into this spring; Stephanie placed second at her first Advanced horse trial of the year, Pine Top,

and was eighth at CIC3* The Fork, which was her last outing before Rolex.

As she gave Port Authority time to settle in at Rolex over the Tuesday and Wednesday before dressage, Stephanie concentrated on keeping her nerves in check. Port Authority is an outstanding cross-country and show jumping horse; what has made Stephanie nervous in the past is actually the 'safest phase', dressage.

"I've never been able to really wrap my head around keeping it all together in the test," she says. "I get nervous and make mistakes. It's been the biggest struggle in my riding. I think it's what has been holding me back competitively."

At Rolex, Stephanie was thankful to have drawn a start time on Thursday, and not to have to wait until Friday.

"I thought I kept my nerves together really well, but if I'd had another 24 hours, I'm not sure I would have been able to do that."

The schooling sessions in Kentucky went well, and by the time Stephanie entered the stadium on Thursday she was feeling better than she ever has at the start of a dressage test.

"For the first time in my life I had a smile on my face starting down centre line. I wanted to feel all the positive emotions of being at Rolex Kentucky."

Stephanie's score of 52.0 penalties speaks for itself.

"Ollie performed exactly the way he was supposed to. I could not have asked for more from him mentally."

When the dressage was over on Friday afternoon, Stephanie sat in 15th place from a starting field of 53 competitors.

With the dressage behind her on Thursday, Stephanie spent Friday trying to stay relaxed; she hand grazed Port Authority in the morning, and did a short show jumping school in the afternoon.

"I had jumped clear at The Fork, but that was because of the greatness of my horse – I made some mistakes."

In order to make sure she would be confident come Sunday, Stephanie had a lesson from David O'Connor, but jumped only about eight fences – just enough to feel like she was on track for Sunday.

"I had been doing dressage for a week up until then. Ollie was very, very happy to see his jumping saddle," she laughs. She also spent time getting to know the cross country course, saying, "It was most certainly a four-star. You didn't walk it and think your brain was going to explode, but it was big enough. I definitely looked at the coffin and hollows and knew they were serious questions. I went back out and looked at them on Saturday before I got on to make sure my plan was clear in my head."

She may have been nervous about the other phases, but Stephanie couldn't wait to get on cross-country.

"I thought it had my horse's name written all over it. He's a fantastic cross country horse. I was so excited to jump into the head of the water."

Stephanie had had no problems with time at Pine Top and The Fork, and when she checked her watch at the four minute marker on the Rolex course, she knew she was on track to make the time. Stephanie and Port Authority were one of 10 pairs to go clear and under the time that day.

Because he is part warmblood, Port Authority is heavier than many top four-star horses. Stephanie has found that he often comes off the cross-country course a little bit hot, and has got used to giving him fluids on Saturday night to make sure he recovers well.

"He came in really hot at Rolex, and I was concerned. He has a lot of muscle mass, which doesn't do him any favours."

Port Authority recovered well from his exertions – well enough to have been deemed the best conditioned horse at this year's event. Stephanie says she probably works harder on her horse on the Saturday night at an event than she needs to, "but I don't ever want to think 'shoot, I should have worked harder.' I always make sure I'm well prepared."

Having team veterinarian Dr. Christina Ober there was a reassurance.

"Christina is always around and knows Ollie like the back of her hand."

Port Authority sailed through the jog on Sunday morning, with Stephanie holding down eighth place. By the time Stephanie put her coat on to walk the show jumping course, she had a good feeling.

"The way Ollie jumped in the warm-up before cross-country made me feel pretty confident. The course looked fantastic. It gave you enough to do."

Stephanie has always worked hard on her technical correctness, and she was ready to put her skill to use. Hers was one of only seven clear rounds within the time. She was thrilled not only with her horse's performance, but with her own.

"It was not one of those times I had to sheepishly say that I owe it to Ollie."

As Stephanie galloped away from the last jump, the realization of what she had just accomplished began to have its first impact.

"I probably did an entire circle cantering in the arena before I had the wits to stop."

She eventually found her way to the exit, where her mom, groom and close friend Lindsay Rairden, and David O'Connor were waiting for her. Once her horse's boots had been weighed, she took the phone and spoke to her father.

"That was it. I cried like a baby!"

Stephanie remembers looking up through the tears and seeing this year's winner, William Fox-Pitt of Great Britain, looking down at her from aboard Cool Mountain and laughing good-naturedly at her.

Michelle C. Dunn



Stephanie Rhodes-Bosch and Port Authority competing in the dressage phase of the Rolex Kentucky Three Day Event

“I was so excited and grateful to everyone who had helped me get there.”

On the final scoreboard of Rolex 2010, there are four rows filled with dashes instead of numbers, indicating pairs who finished on their dressage scores; Stephanie and Port Authority are one of them. At the awards ceremony, Stephanie looked at the riders in front of her and those behind and realized she was in fine company.

“It was amazing that it felt somewhat normal, that I was not completely out of place. I was also standing beside Karen [O’Connor] and Mandiba, so it didn’t feel scary and intimidating.”

Stephanie’s fifth placed ribbon came along with a more practical reward: a cheque for \$20,000.

“The Mayor of Kentucky handed me my envelope, and when I saw the amount I thought, ‘excuse me?’”

The prize money and the HSBC grant will be put to good use: to pay the substantial bills that have accrued this spring as Stephanie prepared for Rolex, and to help fund the next potential stage in her odyssey – a return visit to Kentucky at the end of September.

“I like to think that my results over the past year have put me in a good position,” she says of her Canadian Team prospects. “It’s so exciting to be part of a group of such great talent. I want to be part of that, but I’m not in a position to take anything for granted.”

Port Authority enjoyed a well-earned break in May while Stephanie returned to her current base in Virginia to continue training and competing a group of young horses for their owners. If her WEG plans go as well as all of her plans have so far, Stephanie will take Port Authority to only a couple of events over the summer, including the American Eventing Championships at Chattahoochee Hills in September; the WEG team will be announced at the end of that event. Stephanie knows she has been extremely fortunate to have had her plans so far go exactly as she had hoped.

“I know that’s not the norm. As soon as you make plans, if it can go wrong it will. But I have been able to do everything I have set out to do. I’ve definitely had everything in all the right places.”

Come September 30, the place Stephanie hopes to be is back in the dressage ring at the Kentucky Horse Park.