

Peter Charles and Murka's Pom d'Ami



TEAM CHAMPION

MEYDAN FEI NATIONS CUP ROUND UP

WHEN THE CHIPS ARE DOWN, THE BRITS COME OUT FIGHTING. AND WITH RELEGATION A NEAR CERTAINTY, MOST WOULD HAVE THROWN IN THE TOWEL, BUT WITH TRUE BRIT GRIT, OUR SQUAD IN DUBLIN FOUGHT TOOTH AND NAIL AND SECURED THEIR SPACE

Our fortunes have dipped to the depths this year, and we took a lowly eighth in Rotterdam fielding Michael Whitaker (Wonami Van Den Aard), Geoff Billington (Rosinus), Nick Skelton (Nemo) and Robert Smith (Vangelis S).

In Aachen we didn't make the cut. Riding his third horse Pall Mall H because of the ground conditions, Peter Charles described the going as "like riding on a potato field."

Two riders made their debut here, Phillip Spivey and Romanov joined by Gemma Plumley (Lutine Du Chamois), with Geoff and Rosinus making up the squad.

It was almost the same team at Falsterbo – Gemma Plumley being replaced by Guy Williams and Torinto Van De Middelstede, and we pulled up to fifth. By then things were looking decidedly rocky, and at Hickstead, we were down to three riders in the second round. We finished a dismal seventh.

But we weren't in Dublin to go through the motions. The Emerald Isle has a special place in the heart of the British – we have won the Aga Khan 23 times since its inception. Our best scenario was a British victory. And Belgium doing badly.

Only destined-for-relegation Italy seemed worse off, and this was compounded by their first draw. Drawn second, the Brits pathfinder Ben Maher posted four faults on Quainton Stud's Robin Hood W.

Geoff Billington then rode the round of his life with Patricia Fraser's Rosinus, a newcomer in 2009 at this level who has proved a lynchpin of the team, and again they returned four after the final element of the tricky combination fell.

Fresh Direct Corlato has undergone embryo transfer this year, a procedure that can upset a mare's hormones considerably, but she returned bang to form here to post a magical clear under Tim Stockdale.

We were still in the running as our biggest danger Belgium – the other team fighting relegation – saw poles falling in every round.

Murka's Pom D'Ami, who struggled valiantly in the rain-soaked ground at Hickstead, appeared to prefer Dublin's turf and under anchor Peter Charles's expert guidance, was our third horse to come home on four. With a total of eight faults at the halfway stage, Britain stood equal third alongside Germany.

By some near-miracle, the Italians flourished under new manager Marcus Fuchs and were out in front with the USA on four faults, while Belgium scraped into the second round on 16 faults with the Irish and French. The Netherlands and Sweden were sidelined.

Raising the spirits further, Ben and Robin Hood W remained foot-perfect in the second round. However, our final three riders each clocked up four faults to give us a further score of eight. We were equal second with Switzerland on 16.

A jubilant Italy stayed ahead to post a stunning, unexpected victory on 12 faults. They were just one

fence in front. "We had faced a tough task but we got stuck in and worked together as a team" said Ben Maher, "and some of those four faults could have easily been clears."

Just one would have been enough. The extra point would have forged us ahead of Belgium, who finished in seventh spot here.

Equal fourth with the USA on 20 faults, France still gained enough points to top the Meydan FEI Nations Cup series, four points ahead of the USA.

However, the focus was on the bottom of the table, and Britain was now on level-pegging with Belgium on 22.

The FEI officially declared Belgium would be dropped. However, their rules lack clarity, and after lengthy discussions it was agreed that both Great Britain and Belgium would retain Top Level status.

FINAL STANDINGS

MEYDAN FEI NATIONS CUP™		
1	France	45
2	USA	44
3	Germany	39
4	Switzerland	35
5	Netherlands	28.5
5	Ireland	28.5
7	Sweden	23
8	Great Britain	22
8	Belgium	22
10	Italy	14