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For More Information:
Contact Press Officers John Strassburger & Heather Bailey
707-217-5072/phoenixenterprisesPR@gmail.com
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Nunnink Gallops To Victory At Galway Downs

Temecula, Calif., March 29, 2014 – After taking the two-phase lead in the CIC3* at the Galway Downs International Horse Trials, Kristi Nunnink said that she planned to gallop fast enough around the cross-country course to win, and she did just that. She rode R-Star across the finish line 14 seconds slow, and those 5.6 time faults kept her in front, with a total score of 57.5.

Nunnink's score was good enough to defeat John Michael Durr on Esprit De La Danse (58.4) and Hawley Bennett-Awad on Gin 'N Juice (60.3). Durr, of Woodside, Calif., finished 2 seconds slow to move up from third place, while Bennett-Awad, a Canadian who lives in Temecula, recorded one of only two fault-free cross-country rounds.

"Usually I kind of start off a bit slow, but today I went fast enough early that I could take time to set her up for the last two combinations," said Nunnink, of Auburn, Calif. "I think that was the best round I've ever had on her. I was very happy with her ability to go forward and come back to me today."

Nunnink, 52, didn't let her broken right thumb slow her down. She broke her thumb two weeks ago while dragging the footing in her ring – the tractor's front tires got stuck in the arena footing and then suddenly came loose, roughly spinning the wheel with her thumb stuck in it. The first doctor she saw told her she shouldn't ride for five to six weeks, so she went to another doctor.

"Every doctor I saw had worse news, so I finally stopped going and then just cut the cast off," Nunnink said. "I could feel it on the drops, but otherwise I was fine in my own little zone."

She hopes the thumb will continue to heal as she aims R-Star for the CCI4* at the Rolex Kentucky Three-Day Event in four weeks. "Galway Downs gives me what I need to be prepared for that, because it's a really big course, and you have to be positive and forward to the jumps, just like at Kentucky."

Jolie Wentworth, who stood second after Friday's show jumping, decided not to start GoodKnight on cross-country, saying she thought he didn't need to run again before Rolex Kentucky.

Durr began his climb to his best finish ever in a three-star event with a determined show jumping ride that resulted in one of only four rounds with no time faults. "I thought back to all my jumper work and went for it, like there was big money on the line," said Durr, 26.

He's been riding Esprit De La Sense, 10-year-old Canadian-bred mare, since owner Ruth Bley bought her for Durr to ride in June 2013. He's now aiming her for the CCI3* at Galway Downs in November. Bley rode her own horse to victory in the CCI1* at Galway Downs in November 2013.

"Ruth is such a supporter of West Coast eventing, so it's really important to her that I aim for that and support the wonderful effort Robert's made here at Galway Downs," said Durr.

Jumping faults, more than time faults, decided the CIC2*. Matt Brown and Happenstance emerged as the winners (59.5), following a fault-free performance, defeating Canadian Leah Breakey on Master Plan (60.5) and Martha McDowell on Nabuco De Lessay (64.0).

The two overnight leaders, James Atkinson, on Man On A Mission II, and Emily Pestl-Dimmitt, on Airlington, suffered refusals at the third water combination. Atkinson said he didn't know why his horse stopped twice before jumping into the water.

Since the riders in all three international divisions started on course in reverse order of their two-phase standing, Brown, 37, didn't know he was riding for victory while he was on course. But he knew that going fast was his only chance to move up from third, and he did just that, finishing fault-free.

"He was awesome. That horse is a galloping machine," said Brown of Happenstance, an 8-year-old California-bred Holsteiner who finished 12th in the CCI1* at Galway Downs last November. "I could just gallop that horse every day."

Brown, of Petaluma, Calif., has been riding Happenstance for a year for owner May McKee. "And I'm just feeling he's starting to trust me enough to ask him for things," said Brown. "Just in the last three shows, he's stepped up in a way that made me say, 'This is a serious horse.' Mary has ultimate faith in him that he could go all the way, and after these last few shows, I'm on board with that."

Breakey, 20, said she was "hoping to move up, but it's such a fast course that I didn't think time faults would be much of a factor." Since she trains with Atkinson, it was ironic that his misfortune aided her climb up the rankings, as she finished with no jumping or time faults.

"To finish on my dressage score was great, and he felt amazing all weekend," said Breakey, who lives in Calgary, Alb.

Breakey bought Master Plan, 17, five years ago because he was an experienced competitor at preliminary level. He's become an important part of her life and has far exceeded her expectations. "He's 100 times better than we could have ever possibly imagined," she said.

Alexandra Ahearn kept her position after cross-country in the CIC1*. She and Mai Baum finished the course fault-free (43.0) to better Tamra Smith on Sunsprite Syrius (47.0) and Lauren Billys on Jitter Bug (49.3).

Ahearn, 18, was the last starter on the cross-country course, at 4:42 p.m. "It was very nerve-racking to wait all day, but I felt strong about my ride before I went," said Ahearn, a senior at Bear Creek School in Redmond, Wash.

"I just really like this show," said Ahearn. "There is always a good course, and I like the trade fair. Plus, everyone is so nice, and the weather is nice here. It's nice to get away from winter in Washington."

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General admission for the Galway Downs International Horse Trials is only \$10 per day in advance, \$15 at the gate, with children under 12 free when accompanied by a paying adult.

For more information on the Galway Downs International Horse Trials, visit www.galwaydowns.com or call 951-303-0405. To learn more about eventing, visit the U.S. Eventing Association's website (www.useventing.com).