

Freestyle hits new heights

"The best she has ever been":
Charlotte Dujardin and
Fidermark mare Mount St
John Freestyle score a kür
personal best of 89.5%



Isabell Werth and Weihegold OLD may have defended their Amsterdam crown, but Charlotte Dujardin and Mount St John Freestyle are hot on their heels

Amsterdam CDI-W, Netherlands

By POLLY BRYAN

"THAT was the best she has ever been," declared Charlotte Dujardin after scoring a second personal best in as many days with the 11-year-old Mount St John Freestyle.

The pair gave the World Cup defending champions, Germany's Isabell Werth and Weihegold OLD, a real run for their money, finishing just behind them in both the grand prix and the freestyle. But with 81.9% on day one and a huge 89.5% in the freestyle, Charlotte could have no regrets at the end of the weekend.

She and Emma Blundell's Fidermark mare — the youngest horse in the line-up — pulled off a cracking grand prix test, with just a late change in the one-tempis denting their scoresheet.

"I was going for a 10 in the

ones and I was thinking that they were feeling amazing, then I just lost a bit of straightness on the 13th change and we had a late one behind," explained Charlotte. "I was so cross with myself, and then I didn't ride the left pirouette very well as a result."

But come freestyle day, any mistakes were well behind them. Isabell set the bar as high as they come, busting out a 90.28% test with the Blue Hors Don Schufro daughter with whom she has won here every year since 2016. The delicate 15-year-old mare produced her trademark flawless piaffe-passage, Isabell maximising it to full effect in her complicated programme.

Following a plus-90% performance — and the

subsequent roars of appreciation from the hugely enthusiastic crowd — can't fail to be intimidating, but if anyone can cope with it, it's Charlotte.

"We didn't have the easiest start, as Isabell's score went up on the boards just as we went in, and I could hardly hear my music at the beginning," Charlotte said. "But then Freestyle gave me the best feeling ever in that arena. I'm so, so proud of her; she's just getting better and better. The future is looking so bright."

This was just the fourth time Charlotte and Freestyle have performed their *Frozen*-inspired routine in competition, and it was clear to see this was their best yet. There were no blips in her changes this time, with Charlotte riding a particularly gutsy line of delightfully forward, rhythmic one-times straight up the centre

line. The pirouettes were neat and expressive, the piaffe-passage work much improved compared to a few months ago, and the final massive extended trot elicited thrilled gasps from around the arena. Their scoresheet featured nine 10s and not a single mark below 7.5.

With another 20 points in the bag — as defending champion, Isabell receives an automatic place in the final — Charlotte is now a sizeable step closer to confirming her place in this year's World Cup Final, held in April in Las Vegas, USA. She and Freestyle will next head to the qualifier at 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands, in March.

TOP COMPETITION

THE Amsterdam leg of the World Cup circuit is widely regarded as routinely boasting as stellar a line-up as the final itself, and this year did not disappoint, with the top eight riders in the freestyle all scoring more than 80%.

It was here that Isabell's journey with Weihegold really got underway — they achieved their first international win together here in the freestyle in 2016 — so it was fitting that they should continue their domination of this show.

And the home crowd were not disappointed, with the Netherlands' Edward Gal slotting into third place with the imposing 12-year-old stallion Glock's Zonik. The Blue Hors Zack son was awarded 85.39% — a personal best score.

Britain's Lottie Fry also banked some more valuable points in her quest to reach the Vegas final, riding her Olympia star Everdale to a ninth-place finish with plus-78%. The Lord Leatherdale stallion — the only other 11-year-old in the class besides Freestyle — produced some stunning work, but dropped a few points after an error in the changes and a miscommunication during the pair's tricky pirouette-half-pass sequence. **H&H**

RESULTS

24 Jan: GP (M Sanders-van Gansewinkel, S Baarup, S Hovenaars, A Hamoen, E Ebert). — 1, Weihegold OLD (I Werth) GER 83.57; 2, Mount St John Freestyle (C Dujardin) GBR 81.96%; 3, Desperado NOP (E Scholtens) NED 77.87; 4, Everdale (C Fry) GBR 75.7. GP kür. — 1, Weihegold OLD 90.28; 2, Mount St John Freestyle 89.5; 3, Glock's Zonik (E Gal) NED 85.36; 9, Everdale 78.25.