

Going for

GOLD

MISDEE WRIGLEY MILLER SOARS TO NEW HEIGHTS

By Sadie Fowler



Misdee Wrigley Miller, along with James (Jimmy) Fairclough, left, and Charles Webster, proudly accepted the gold.



Miller, pictured during the competition, says combined driving requires an extraordinary amount of physical, mental and emotional focus.
Photo by Becky Lawson Bartosz

Misdee Wrigley Miller feels blessed to have achieved just about everything possible as a competitor within the American Saddlebred/Hackney show world, but her most recent accomplishment as an equestrian has no doubt been the greatest one of all. And ironically, it had nothing to do with the world of American Saddlebreds or roadsters ... or even show horses for that matter.

Last month, Miller, along with two other male teammates, represented Team USA at the FEI World Equestrian Games, held this year at the Tryon Equestrian Center in Mill Spring, North Carolina. In what they called an amazing and surprise victory, the U.S. team captured gold for their skills in the combined driving category of competition.

"You know when you watch the Olympics and you see the athletes standing on the podium and they raise the flag and the athlete looks totally overwhelmed?" said Miller, describing the monumental victory. "That's how I felt. All the hours of training we put into it ... it's a very overwhelming feeling. There were a lot of blood, sweat and tears put into this and it was simply overwhelming, and amazing."

Miller, one of only two females to compete in the competition, teamed up with Chester Weber and James Fairclough for the gold star victory. For Miller's specific portion of the four-in-hand competition, she paired up with her equestrian partners Beau, her 12-year-old KWPN gelding; Bravour 54, her 12-year-old KWPN gelding; Bolino D, another 12-year-old KWPN gelding; and Calipso 86, her 11-year-old Dutch Warmblood gelding.

Miller said winning gold has been her greatest achievement thus far as an equestrian. "It was a difficult road physically, mentally and emotionally," said Miller. "I feel like this win basically wrapped up my bucket list of things to accomplish as a rider ... Would I like to win the open five-gaited world's championship at Louisville? Sure, of course I would ... but that's not likely going to happen so I'm thinking this was pretty much it."

This year, held Sept. 21-23, served as the eighth edition of the games, which are held every four years and run by the International Federation for Equestrian Sports.

"In a week that exuded many historic moments for the U.S. equestrian teams, combined driving added another," according to an article about Team USA on USEF.org. "They closed out their home FEI World Equestrian Games (WEG) with their first-ever four-in-hand team gold medal."

The U.S. Driving Team and their respective groups of horses ended with 353.39 penalties, following three phases of competition, to capture the gold. The Netherlands won silver and Belgium carried home the bronze.

In an interview with Saddle Horse Report following the games, Miller, a fourth-generation horsewoman who is well-known for achieving many world's championship victories at Louisville, said the preparation for the games was grueling. She also said the difference between showing horses and competing in this type of competition is extraordinary.

"It's night and day," she said. "It's completely different because I am myself immersed in the day-to-day training of my horses. Of course, if there's an issue with a horse my trainer will take them and drive them some, but I am involved in the training for this on a daily level."

Going into the competition, Miller said she knew she'd be taking on the best men competitors from around the world, which required discipline, physically, mentally and emotionally.

The combined driving competition is considered to be the ultimate test of communication between the athlete and their horses.

"I knew it might be the last chance to achieve the ultimate goal," she said. "I took to my husband James about it and he said, 'I'll support you.' So, we pretty much put everything else on hold as I prepared."

Miller, a life-long show horse enthusiast, began her involvement in this type of driving several years ago and by 2010 she had moved up to the advanced level in the pair horse division, where she collected top placings. She switched to the four-in-hand horse division in 2014. In 2018, Miller placed second at Palm Tree CDE and WEG Driving Test Event, third at Sandringham CAI, and fourth at Live Oak International.

This year's course was described as being challenging and technical; one that was dependent on precision and accuracy. Miller and her horses were the first on the course for the U.S. team, with Fairclough and Weber going second and third, respectively.

"Serving as the pathfinder, Miller helped the team gain a solid understanding of the tough course at hand," according to the website.

Miller agreed the course was very tough and tight, but said her horses were incredibly responsive, brilliant and made the best of a very challenging course.

"It has been an amazing journey, learning about horsemanship, about finding the right combination of horses, and trying to learn new skills," she said. "It has been so much fun; I've put my life on hold the past year because this was my goal and focus. It was worth every second."

Miller's main goal going into the competition this year was to beat her previous placing from the 2014 games, which were held in Normandy, France, and perhaps earn a spot on the podium.

"It was just an incredible and overwhelming experience," she said. "I couldn't have done it without the support of my teammates."

Her teammates agreed, saying that Miller added a great dynamic to the team.

"It was a lot of fun to be on this team," Weber said. "When I was introduced to combined driving, Jimmy was my teacher; I was 13 years old. I remember when Misdee came up to me at the Florida State Fair and wanted to get into carriage driving, so it was really humbling and nice to be here."

"Winning gold was a surprise. I thought we came here with a chance at a medal, but if you asked me to bet on if we would be the world champions at the end of the week, I would have said 'I'm not sure.'"

Miller, as the owner of Saddlebreds and Roadsters that have won four horse world's grand championships, she's had many proud moments over the course of her life in the horse business, but last month's victory ranks at the very top.

"I'm blessed with fabulous horses and an incredible training facility," she said. "I feel very fortunate."

Looking ahead, Miller says she's looking forward to wrapping up the horse show season at this week's American Royal and then bouncing back and forth between Florida, Europe and Lexington, Kentucky, where she also owns a company.

"I love the off-season," she laughed, adding she enjoys watching her young horses develop and fine tuning her string of horses for the season that follows. "When you're in the horse business, there's always something to do."

Miller said one of her goals this winter is, quite simply, getting her calendar in order and figuring out what's in store for her next. Likely, she'll find another monumental goal to conquer and there's no doubt she'll succeed.



Miller is a fourth-generation horsewoman.



Misdee Wrigley Miller, an equestrian who has achieved it all.



Miller had her game face on for last month's FEI World Equestrian Games.



The key difference in this sport and showing horses, Miller explained, was her day-to-day involvement in the training.