

MILLION DOLLAR BABY

Ashlee Bond Clarke and Chela LS
Take Home Richest Prize
in Show Jumping



photos by Sharon McElvain



“This mare comes out every day wanting to win. It’s been all about finding that partnership for us and I THINK WE HAVE FOUND IT.”

Ashley Bond Clarke, from Hidden Hills, California, put her personal stamp on the 2014 HITS Thermal circuit, starting with a win in the \$25,000 SmartPak Grand Prix in week one, following up that win with a blue ribbon in the \$33,500 HITS Desert Classic Grand Prix in week two, and putting the proverbial cherry on top to close out the circuit with a victory in the AIG \$1 Million Grand Prix.

Ashlee Bond Clarke admits that she had to keep her nerves and her emotions in check when entering the ring for the jump-off of Sunday’s AIG \$1 Million Grand Prix, presented by Lamborghini Newport Beach, at HITS Thermal. She was, however, a picture of poise and control to the crowd of 4,000 spectators that looked on as she topped a star-studded field to win the historic event with Little Valley Farms’ Chela LS.

Sunday’s order was a “who’s who” of international show jumping with horse and rider accolades littering the list. The original order consisted of 39 riders who showed over a course designed by Marina Azevedo of São Paulo, Brazil. Fourteen obstacles and 17 jumping efforts made up the track, which boasted tall verticals, wide oxers and a formidable triple combination.

“It still hasn’t sunk in,” she said. “This was the biggest track I have ridden on

this mare, but she comes out every day wanting to win. It’s been all about finding that partnership for us and I think we have found it.”

“The course was really well-built,” said Bond Clarke. “It was big, technical and scopey, but not unfair. There were faults everywhere and that’s the mark of a great course.”

A crowd favorite and East Coast challenger, Bezie Madden of Cazenovia, New York, clipped the ribbon on clear rounds and jumped Coral Reef Via Volo perfectly for owner Coral Reef Ranch. One trip later, fellow East Coast contender Todd Minikus piloted Quality Group’s Quality Girl to secure a jump-off. Six more followed their lead and set the stage for an eight-horse jump-off.

Madden and Minikus both had a rail at the second-to-last fence of the shortened course—a tall vertical. East Coast hopes were not forsaken, however, as Kirsten Coe of Royal Palm Beach, Florida, clocked a clear round in 46.86 seconds with Baronez, owned by Ilan Ferder, Lovsta Stuteri and Tal Milstein. “This course really suited my horse, and my plan from the very beginning was to get a double clear and not try to ride faster than the speedsters behind me,” said Coe. “I just

wanted to put some pressure on and I did that—my horse performed great.”

The next clear round didn’t come until the last two trips of the jump-off when Nayel Nassar of Santa Clara, California and Bond Clarke gave the crowd a jump-off to remember. 2013 Zoetis Million victor and West Coast favorite, Nassar jumped his own Lordan to a clear round in 45.38 seconds with just Bond Clarke to follow. She put the speed of her big-strided mare to the test and crossed the timers in 41.16 seconds—more than three seconds faster than Nassar.

“Ashlee and I were joking about going one-two earlier in the week and if there’s anyone I don’t mind losing to, it’s her,” said Nassar, who has jumped Lordan throughout the HITS Desert Circuit, but gave the gelding a break before the AIG Million. “I gave him the week off and didn’t even bring him to this part of the show grounds for about ten days, hoping the new jumps and the crowd would impress him today and they certainly did.”

A cross-country trip proved well worth the effort for Coe, Madden and Minikus as they took home their fair share of the prize money, rounding out the top five in third, fourth and fifth respectively.

After watching two West Coast riders jump to the top in Sunday’s money, HITS president and CEO Tom Struzziari was pleased to see their efforts at HITS Thermal pay off. “To see the leading money winner of the circuit come out and win the big class was great,” he said. “It really validates this circuit—there were some pretty heavy hitters that came here from the east, but the West Coast stood their ground and produced great sport.”

Struzziari said that the HITS Triple Crown of Show Jumping set out to do three things and it accomplished all of them. “The sport was superb, we introduced show jumping to a lot of new fans and we satisfied one of the top equine sponsors in the world—AIG. I am really proud to be a part of it,” he concluded.

The AIG \$1 Million Grand Prix put the final exclamation point on a very successful 2014 HITS Desert Circuit.

