

Ben Maher living New York dream with second overall LGCT title

By Danielle Rossingh, CNN

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(CNN) — Ben Maher produced a brilliant performance to win the New York leg of the Longines Global Champions Tour for the world's top show jumpers and claim the overall title for the second successive year.

Unlike last year, when Maher and his Dutch-bred wonderhorse, Explosion W, were so dominant they clinched the overall championship with one more event to go, the 2019 title race had gone right down to the wire. Maher had been trailing his rival Pieter Devos of Belgium by just one point before winning the 18th and final leg in New York.

Earlier on Saturday, Maher had also brought home the overall championship for the London Knights in the Global Champions League for teams.

"I knew it was going to be a tough weekend," said Maher. "The dream was going to be to win the team and the individual, obviously. And this doesn't happen very often."

Maher, a 36-year-old Briton, paid tribute to Explosion W, a big-striding, 10-year-old chestnut gelding. This season, the pair, who also won in Rome and London, have amassed €593,151 (\$648,968) in prize money.

"What a horse," said Maher. "He is incredible and I am very lucky to ride him."

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Ben Maher, riding Explosion W, won the final round of the Global Champions Tour in New York, to clinch the overall title for the second straight year.

Jump-off

Riding third in a seven-horse jump-off, the pressure seemed to get to Devos, who made a mistake early on that caused his horse Claire Z to stop in front of an oxer. The Belgian eventually finished in seventh place in New York with eight penalties.

"I don't know what to say really," said Maher, when asked if he had spoken to Devos. "I feel bad for him, it's been a tough day, he gave a great fight. ...He had an unfortunate mistake here. It's sport, it's happened to me before and I am sure he is going to come back strong."

As the sixth rider to go, Maher steered Explosion W round the sandy arena on Governors Island, off the southern tip of Manhattan, at a steady pace. The pair took the lead with a clear round in 34.08 seconds, beating the previous leader, Germany's Marcus Ehning and Cornado NRW, by 0.57 seconds.

Could the final rider, Maher's London Knights' teammate, Martin Fuchs, stage an upset?

Riding his second horse, The Sinner, the Swiss rider was never able to match Explosion W's pace, and eventually finished in third place, 0.87 seconds behind Maher.

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"There was a lot of pressure before coming here," said Fuchs. "So we said we bring Clooney and Explosion, two of our best horses. We knew we had to win, and that's what we came for."

With the regular season now finished, all eyes will be on the GC Prague Playoffs. Staged in the middle of the Czech capital between November 21-24, the Playoffs will see the world's top riders battling it out for a total prize money pot of \$3.3 million.



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Photos: Best images from 2019 Global Champions Tour and GCL

Prague: The season champions walk into the O2 arena ahead of the Longines Global Champions To Super Grand Prix at the GC Prague Playoffs.

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'A naturally fast horse'

"It was a fast jump-off here today, Explosion jumped incredible in the first round and the first round of the Grand Prix, so he gave me a lot of confidence," said Maher.

"He felt a little bit quiet, it's been a hot day here today for the jump-off, but I got going and picked the distance up everywhere I needed to pick it up," he added. "He is naturally a fast horse, he just understands me, I understand him, we have a great connection and it's just a pleasure to be in a sport like this."

Maher took his second overall individual title with 301 points, 18 points clear of Devos. Germany's Daniel Deusser finished in third place, at 34 points back.

"It's incredible," said Maher, who won Olympic gold at the 2012 London Games. "Last year was a little bit unexpected. I had two 9-year-old horses that really carried me the whole season, and we won one or two shows early, so there wasn't too much pressure. This year, I've used Explosion a little less. ...I've used multiple horses, and it just shows how lucky I am, to have the few owners that I have, and they support me to make this all possible."

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Global Champions League

Fuchs, riding the experienced gelding Clooney 51, and Maher with Explosion W, produced four flawless rounds over two days to win the final event of the regular season. The Paris Panthers were second, while the Prague Lions finished third.

The Knights won the overall title with 326 points, just three points clear of Saint Tropez Pirates, and 23 points ahead of Madrid in Motion. The Knights had won Madrid, Cascais (Portugal), Stockholm and London earlier in the season.

As team manager and rider, Maher played an instrumental role in its success. After securing the win in New York, the Briton paid tribute to his team, which also included Under-25 rider Emily Moffitt of Britain and Belgian twin brothers Olivier and Nicola Philippaerts.



"The whole team have played a part," Maher said, adding it hadn't been an easy season as the Knights struggled with a few rider injuries.

It has also been a successful season for Fuchs, the newly crowned European champion.

"A great year for me," said Fuchs. "My horse Clooney has been fantastic the whole year, and to be in such a team with the London Knights and to be with Ben Maher performing always great, it's amazing."

The Knights had been lying in pole position in New York overnight, and after Fuchs and Clooney put down a clear round on Saturday, Maher rode into the arena as the final rider in the knowledge four penalties or better would bring home the overall team title once again.