

Fuego XII and Juan Manuel Muñoz Diaz

By Erin Gilmore

Electric. Artistic. Unforgettable. By the end of their freestyle, which opened to the notes of a Spanish guitar and concluded with a showman's flourish, Juan Manuel Muñoz Diaz and Fuego XII had gained 46,496 new fans. The judges may have placed them fifth, but in front of a packed stadium during the Grand Prix Dressage Freestyle at the 2010 Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games last fall, they became instant audience favorites.

In a discipline that rarely varies from the population of warmbloods at its top levels, that freestyle brought new attention to Spanish bred horses, and to Fuego, a 13-year-old Pura Raza Española stallion. As Juan rode one handed tempi changes down centerline and the crowd exploded in cheers, Fuego became the latest, and perhaps brightest, shining star to show that PRE horses can hold their own at the grand prix level.

"The stadium was on fire with Fuego XII," recounts Juan. "That's what excited me most. For me it was one of the highlights of my professional life. I felt a great satisfaction and joy; it was amazing."

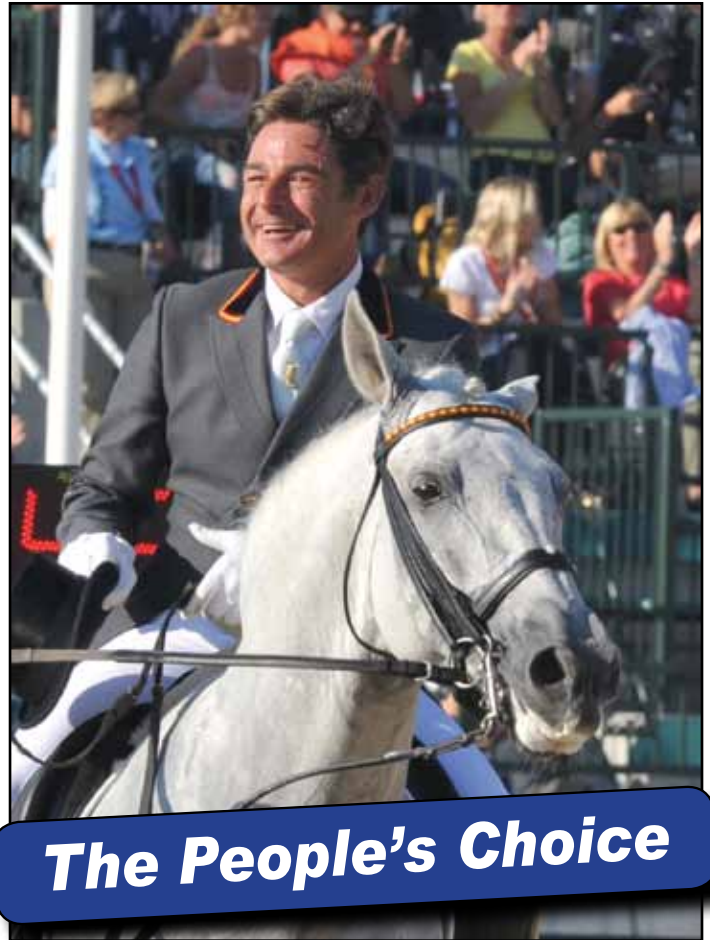
The Cárdenas Tradition

Juan and Fuego's path to WEG began in Ecija, a town near Seville, in the south of Spain. The area is known not only as one of the most beautiful cities in Andalucía, but as a region with a great equestrian tradition that is home to Spain's most prestigious PRE stud farms. Juan trains from Yeguada Cárdenas (The Cardenas Stud), one of the oldest and most traditional Spanish stud farms worldwide. Owned by Miguel Angel de Cárdenas, the magnificent Spanish stud farm has produced 14 Spanish National Championship winners, and the Cárdenas PREs are a favorite subject of photographer Robert Vavra, who has featured them in several of his books.

Into that illustrious fold, Juan had the good fortune to be hired as Yeguada Cárdenas' head trainer just as Fuego turned 4 years old. Before WEG, the pair were already 2008 Olympic veterans and Spanish national champions. As a result of their international schedule, they spend months every year living and competing from Europe, but when they are home in Spain, tradition rules. Fuego stands at stud at the farm, and has sired over 50 offspring, a notable accomplishment for a high performance competition horse.

Juan's daily routine includes schooling the young horses at the stud, overseeing working students and teaching. And "at 11:30 each morning, I start working with Fuego. We go for a walk through the countryside followed by a training session for about 45 minutes," Juan says. "When Fuego is breeding, his work is not as hard, and in January we started to train for the upcoming competitions."

Their connection that was so apparent during WEG is due to that close, nearly lifelong partnership between horse and rider. Juan, who first spotted Fuego as a colt



Juan Manuel Muñoz Diaz and Fuego XII after the Grand Prix Special at WEG

Photo by Lauren R. Giannini

at auction, has not only brought him along through his entire career, to this day he is hands on in the care of the grey stallion. "I personally take care of Fuego, firstly because I like horses, and secondly because I think it is very important for a rider to know your horse," he explains. "Not only are you there to ride, you must know him perfectly, and that can only be achieved by having a good friendship with him."

"After all these years training with him, this horse still has something special in his big eyes," Juan adds. "He is suspicious of people he does not know, and he loves all kinds of fruit. He has a great personality, when he goes to a new place he says 'attention, I'm here.' He likes to show off."

A Bright Future

And show off he did. Their WEG ride, which sparked debate on the value of technical versus artistic merit in dressage, was celebrated for bringing a new level of artistic excitement to the freestyle. "We can not forget that this discipline is an art," adds Juan. "We have to have light and movement with our horses, and in the performances with music the artistic part is very important."

Looking ahead, Juan's focus is on the 2011 European Championships, where a high-placing performance will give him qualification for London in 2012. The impact he made at WEG will carry over for at least that long, and two more years together to refine their style even more makes for a bright future.

As the nearly 50,000 dressage fans left the Kentucky Horse Park on that chilly fall night last October, it's safe to say that they were sharing the same thoughts. At its worst, dressage is dull, dry and without joy. But at its best, dressage is Fuego XII.