

FEI Endurance European Championships, Samorin, Slovakia

by Talitha Bakker ■ photos by Elements Resort/Richard Binder, Frans Arts, Michaela Litovova, Marijke Visser photo archive, Steve Rogerson

In Samorin, Slovakia, the European Championships for Endurance horses were held. A beautiful 100 hectares resort that is known to host all kinds of sport all year long. The track was mostly flat which would increase the average speed of the riders competing. Different from other championships was that this time a remote vetgate, challenging the crew and riders even more seen the logistic part.

62 combinations from 20 different nations where entered,

including some top riders like Marijke Visser (NLD) who won silver at the World Championships last year, Jean Frances (FRA) and ofcourse the Spanish riders who always make a very strong team. The track was 160km long and the competition in very strong.

At 6am all riders started the race. Team Spain took the lead with all five riders in the Top Ten. Also Marijke Visser was in the lead together with Jean Frances and three Hungarian



Riders. The first loop was an easy one of 40km. First to enter the vetgate was Marijke Visser (NED) with her Laiza de Jalima, riding an average speed of 22.98 km/h, needing only 0:54 seconds of recovery time! She was followed closely by Jean Philip Frances (FRA) riding Secret mon Coeur, Jaume Punt Dachs (ESP) with Ajayeb, Alex Moral (ESP) with Calandria PH, Maria Alvarez (ESP) with Selif de la Nie and Javier Arnedo Cervera (ESP) with Strawblade. In this vetgate, Team Hungary unfortunately lost one competitor due to metabolic problems.

The second loop of the race was the toughest one. 30km including a difficult climb up to 550m, dropping the average speed to 17.95 km/h and lead by Marijke Visser, followed 30 seconds later by Frances (FRA) and the entire Spanish team. The second vetgate was the end of two Belgium competitors, one from the French team, one of the British, one from Finland and one from Portugal – who had only one rider competing.

Again a fast recovery and the first riders left the vetgate, on to the 3rd loop of 40km alongside the beautiful river of Danube. The lead remained the same and again there was a high dropout at the vetgate. The Swedish team, Polish team, Norway, Russia, Slovakia, Italy, France, Bulgaria and Belgium all lost one teammate due to Lameness. The team from Hungary had even two members eliminated!





The Top Ten remained more or less the same as they went into the 4th loop. 30km to go to the last vetgate and the average speed went up to 25.39 km/h with Marijke Visser (NED) on the lead, with only seconds to spare over Jaume Puntí (ESP). Again a high number of drop-outs in the 4th vetgate. Team Belgium saw another rider eliminated here, so did Germany, Spain, Czech Republic, Italy, Switzerland, Austria and Sweden had even two horses dropping out. At this moment only the Dutch Team still has all five teammates in the race with one at the leading position.

As the riders go in the last loop, the excitement is skyhigh. It is obvious that Marijke Visser and Jaume Puntí are going for total victory. With the speed of 32.45 km/h the horses are flying at this last 20km loop. It was Puntí who left

the vetgate first, followed closely by Marijke Visser at only seconds apart. The two were neck and neck with a very exciting spring finish. Just moments before finishing, the saddle of Marijke Visser's horse Laiza de Jalima moved back, making it very hard to stay on. Puntí took immediate advantage of this opportunity and finished first, just one second to spare on Marijke Visser who miraculously held on like a champion and came down from her horse safely, claiming the Silver at this impressive European Championships! Bronze was for Phillipe Frances (FRA) who also won the Best Condition.

The Team gold medal went to the fantastic team of Spain, who had only one teammate eliminated but still managed to finish with four outstanding riders: Gold medal winner





Jaume Punti with Ajayeb, Alex Moral (4th) with Calandria PH, former Worldchampion Maria Alvarez (5th) with Selif de la Nie and Javier Cervera (6th) with Strawblade.

The team silver went to France, who had two riders eliminated but still had three riders in the top results. Bronze medal winner Jean Philippe Frances with Secret Mon Coeur, Nina Lissarrague (9th) with Keeshan D'Aillas and Enora Boulenger (11th) with Guarfao de Bozouls.

The team bronze went to The Netherlands, who for the first time in history, had an entire team of five riders at the finish! Silver medal winner Marijke Visser with Laiza





de Jalima, Carmen Römer (16th) with Siglavy Bagdady Zeus, Melissa Huijsman (17th) with Kain, Iris van der Horst (21st) with Benthe and Jarmila Lakeman (23th) with Okkie. □



Marijke Visser interview

The Purebred Arabian horse is known for not only their beauty but first and mostly for their endurance and hardness. It was made to wander the desert for miles without getting tired. Since 1955 long distance riding is an official sport and enjoyed by many horse enthusiasts around the world. Competitions start with 20km and go as long as 160km which has to be completed in one day. Over the past years, it has mostly been the middle eastern countries that dominate the top ranking of endurance riding but since 2013 a new name has risen to the top. Marijke Visser (22) started riding endurance in 2008 and since then slowly made her way to the top. In 2015 she was chosen as best female endurance rider in the world during the HH Sheikhha Fatima Bint Mubarak Darley Awards in Hollywood, USA. On a rainy afternoon in August we visit Marijke Visser in England - where she is training for the upcoming European championships in Slovakia next month – to talk about the one thing she loves the most: Endurance.



MV: It is difficult to name a track which was most tricky to ride. The track can get difficult when the terrain is very bad with a lot of mud. A race can also be hard when it is very hot or when a horse needs to race the whole track alone. To me the difficulty of a track depends on the circumstances and the horse I am riding. I can experience the track with one horse completely different than with another. My preference is to ride a technical track in Europe, with corners and slopes. That makes it exciting and that's when your training kicks in. They need to be obedient and agile and the feeling that the horse tries to think along and to feel their enthusiasm is so special! You can really work together with

the horse and for me this is the ultimate.

TA: *You're since a few years a familiar face in the Endurance World. Do you still recall how you experienced your first Endurance championships and how did you build up your training to get to this level?*

MV: My first championship was amazing! It was the World Championships for Young Riders 2011 and was held in Abu Dhabi. I was selected with the horse Eomer. I was still very inexperienced and Eomer very young. We were sent to Abu Dhabi with a team of four Dutch riders. Our goal was to bring the whole team to the finish line. I was very careful with Eomer and we finished at the 17th position! I was so proud of him! It felt so special to be selected by your country to represent them at a World Championships and to compete with some of the best young riders in the world! And all of this in a country far away from home. But above all, I felt in love with UAE. I love the desert!

The World championships in Abu Dhabi will be remembered forever. I learned so much and the love for Eomer grew ever bigger.

TA: *You have successfully completed almost ten 160km Endurance races and countless endurance races of less km's all over Europe. What was the most difficult track you have ridden until now?*

TA: *Can you share with us some of your endurance experiences you will never forget?*

MV: Ohh I have just too many! You can't ask me to choose! Haha. I think my first victory with Eomer in 2012 was very special. We came to learn and compete with the strong young French riders and won! I was so proud on Eomer! I will also never forget my first meeting with Laiza. That was very special. Especially because at that time I had no idea who she was and what she would mean to me. If you would have told me back then what we have all accomplished now two years later I would of never dare to believe it!

But I will also never forget how Eomer and I missed the Gold medal at the European Championships for young riders by just one second. It was a very difficult and exciting race.

I have so many moments to be grateful for. I met people I would never want to miss again and I have gotten opportunities that brought me where I am today. I can still remember all of the races I have participated in and all of them are memories I cherish. Some positive, some less positive but all moments I learned from.

TA: *At this moment, Marijke Visser is riding the incredible mare Laiza de Jamila. Laiza is purebred Arabian and bred in France. She has a French/Polish pedigree and comes from the stallion Ismael Daubanel and out of the mare Pirula. Ismael is a son of the Spanish Abul Beka – who goes back to the famous Barquillo – who is better known as being*

the grandfather to the famous mare Estopa en the by Yeguada Militar de Jerez bred stallion Uzacur (Marquillo). This last stallion most known by breeding beautiful heads in the mid 70's and who was intensely used in the breeding program of his Royal Highness Pedro Salas from Mallorca. The dam of Laiza de Jalima is the Polish bred Pirula. A daughter of two times World champion in halter: Piruet (Probat x Pieczes) and the mare Fully de Raynes (Forex (Pohaniec) x Ruxia (Exelsjor – Negativ). With Laiza, Marijke won the Silver medal at the World Championships in Normandy last year and will now compete at the European Championships in Slovakia. We asked Marijke: Who is Laiza and what is so special about this mare?

MV: You are asking me to tell you about Laiza. They are simply no words that can describe this mare but I will try.

To me she is the best mare in the world. She is small but brave, she has the most amazing eyes and is white as snow. Her head is beautifully shaped and she can speak with her ears. She loves the people that take care of her. She is sweet but you have to ask her things, don't demand anything. She will go through fire for you but only when this is mutual. She knows what she came here to do during a race and wants to give her full 100%. But only if you trust her and open up to her. She takes me on this journey, 160km long and tells me what to do. Laiza is special. Not because of what she has achieved but more because who she is, what she is giving me and what I have accomplished because of her. She dances for me with her tail up high and her nose in the air. Snorting and blowing. During the race she fight for me with her neck arched and her ears pointed forwards. She is my silver friend that gives me so much more than the world can see!

TA: Who did you prepare Laiza for the European Championships?

MV: I prepare Laiza under the guidance of her trainer Anzac Mehmood and my trainer Kristel van den Abeele. I think we are a very strong team and I feel blessed to be part of it. Laiza is very special, this we all know. Everything we do is being done with a lot of love and respect to her because we know that only then Laiza will give us her best.

TA: Now that you have won two silver medals at such important events, tell us what your future plans are with Laiza and how long do you expect to compete at this high level?

MV: We will see what the future will bring us. But whatever it is, I will love her as long as I live. First she will have her well deserved holiday with me in Belgium. And when it is time to enter the next race, Laiza will tell me.

TA: There are many children who dream about ri-

ding endurance championships. Do you have any advice to the young people who dream of following in your footsteps?

MV: Haha, I still feel a beginner myself! But I believe it's good to dare to dream. And even if you just started, be focused and work hard. I always had only one goal and that was keeping the horses in shape and happy for the race. I had no real clue of which I was doing. But even when I had to wear a headlight to be able to train my horses in the dark after school, I went for it. The road to success is never easy, but don't give up and keeping fighting for your dream!

After the European Championships in Slovakia, we revisited Marijke. The competition was excited, the average speed so fast and the finish was a thrill. Marijke was racing for the gold and in the very last minute, her saddle came loose and almost turned this race into a nightmare. We asked Marijke how she experienced the championship:

(the following report is written by Marijke Visser)

06:00uur the start: At the moment of the start we are focused in control but the speed is high. The top riders are forming the lead and we are amongst them. We are riding fast and before I know it we reach the



first grooming point. Laiza is playing with her grooms and the water bottles. She likes to challenge the people. We continue the race. She is calm, focused but a group of ducks flying away gives her the opportunity to check if I am still awake in the saddle. ;-)) - It makes me smile and she smiles with me. She is galloping bravely forward and I follow the top riders who I admire deeply. Then comes the small part in the track that is obligated to ride in walking speed. The top riders dismount from their horses. Laiza dances a bit and takes a few deep breaths. Just a few km's now and the First loop is already finished. We finish the first loop in gallop and can quickly continue to the vetgate.

The 2nd loop:

Laiza is ready to go. Full of power. Dancing, playing with the reins. The number one speeds away and Laiza is allowed to follow. This loop is the most technical loop of the day with climbs and downhill. With her ears forward she fiercely gallops towards

her opponent. The first few km's are flat and we are going fast. The first grooming point goes easy and Laiza is in the leading position. The number two is right behind me and with the first climb, the speed is reduced. We climb the mountain in walking speed and behind us we hear the sound of a big group of fast galloping horses that appear from the village and galloping towards their first climb. Laiza is feeling it and it is almost as she is saying: "Let's go faster! They are coming!". I prefer to wait and hold back as the climb is really steep but of course I feel the tension as well. The group of galloping horses is closing in and we are continuing the track as a group. The slope continues after a number of curves and now we really need to climb. Some riders are walking besides their horses and I am hanging on Laiza's neck who fiercely tries to pass the other horses by walking on the cliff edges. The first part of the loop is mainly up but when we are half way we start to descent. When we reach the water points, we give our horses the time they need to drink and cool down. Laiza is the one who decides to be the first one to leave and I just have to follow. The loop is beautiful but very hard. The track is bad and the descending steep. The speed goes up and the



Group falls apart. We lose the leading position. We cannot see them anymore. Laiza is getting strong and pushes me to

go faster. It is almost like she is saying: "Don't be a coward! Let me go!" But the track is too bad and it is going downhill quite steep.. "I trust you Laiza," I think by myself "I know you can do it but please be careful as we still have so many km's to go!" I take a good grip on the reins and decide to let her go and try to follow her as much as I can. "Easy Laiza" I hear myself thinking. "It's okay! Let them go." But Laiza doesn't want to slow down. With her ears forward she goes for it and just before we enter the vetgate, she reaches the rest of the leading group. The vetgate goes fast and Laiza is looking at me like "I told you I could do it!"

The 3rd Loop:

We are the First one to leave and do this nice and

easy. It is a long loop and we are not in a hurry. It doesn't take much time or two more riders are catching up with us and the three of us are in the leading position. The average speed stays at a comfortable speed and the galloping goes well. Laiza is relaxed and she follows the other horses. From time to time she takes the leading position to keep fresh. She likes to lead but it makes the long km's along the riverside a bit harder. Halfway through the loop the rest of the group connects and the speed goes up. The vetgate goes smoothly. Even before we could start checking her heartbeat, Laiza says it's ok, let's go and then you can simply do nothing else then follow her.

The 4th loop:

We are allowed to leave as second. Laiza can hardly wait and flies away when we get permission to start, looking for number one – who we cannot see even when we reach the first curve. We are going so fast, much too fast. Laiza is trying to locate the leading horse and in a flash we see him. Laiza wants to go after him but we are already going so fast. We lose him again and connect with the group of riders who follow us. The speed is fast but steady. Halfway we meet the leading rider and the speed immediately drops. On the water point all the horses gratefully drink and are cooled down. Laiza is again the first one to leave. Easy. She is in the leading position with the Group following closely. She is galloping with her ears forward along the riverside with the sun striking her noble head.

The last loop:

And yes, It is quite exciting, being just three seconds behind the reigning 2013 European Gold champion. Behind Juma Punti, a rider and trainer I so much admire. With his big strong mare he allows Laiza and me to follow him. Laiza is not worried. She just wants to go! Juma gives me a hug before we leave and there we go! Into the last loop! Juma First and me and Laiza at his tail. Laiza follows and I just follow Laiza.

The sound of the wind goes faster and faster. The loop is flat and straight forward. The trees pass us quickly but the ground gets barely touched. Laiza is floating and uses no effort at all. It is just the sound you can hear. Then she snorts a few times with her ears forward and at that moment I just know we can do this. Laiza is doing what she came here to do... and she is loving it! As fast as we go, she still takes time to play with the grooms, handing me the water bottles to cool her down. We are going fast and the finish gets in sight. Juma carefully makes the last turns and Laiza is following just as carefully. We are reaching the last mile and Laiza wants to go! Ze makes herself longer, takes a deep breath, closes in on Juma and goes for it.

But then that Saddle. That stupid saddle.. I can do nothing else then hold her back. The gap gets bigger and it is just too much... I feel the desperation in Laiza. She wants to go so badly! She deserves so much better than this! This is not how I wanted her to finish! As gentle as she is, she brings me to the finish line safely, with the saddle almost at her butt. We finish as second and take the silver. I am so proud! I am so grateful for Sheikh Abdulla Bin Faisal to let me ride this special horse and to Anzac, Kristel, Emile and the whole groomteam who made this possible. But most of all; thank you Laiza....

"Laiza, sweet sweet Laiza. So brave and so fast. So small but so fierce. Such sparking eyes and white like shining silver. She knows what to do and wants to give you all she can. She tells me what to do and knows how it's been done. It is not the medal she gives me that makes me so privileged. It is the moment I first saw her and what she did to me. It is what she has learned me and what she gives me. It is everything she is doing for me and how she makes me feel. It is because of her what I have achieved and it is because of her what I have learned. But it is not me who taught her everything. There is someone who values her much longer. Who believed in her when she was little and who taught her to be proud"

Results Marijke Visser:

- 2010: CEIYJ1* (90km) Nettersheim (GER): 1st with Amalaswinta
- 2011: CEI2* (120km) Compiègne (FRA): 44th with Noumea des Sauvlons
CEI2* (130km) Argentan (FRA): 18th with Eomer
CEIYJ2* (120km) Ermelo (NED): 4th with Noumea des Sauvlons
- 2012: CEI2* (130km) Aumont (FRA): 2nd with Kain
CEIYJ2* (120km) Corlay FRA): 1st with Eomer
CEIYJ2* (120km) Leersum (NED): 1st with Karel
CEIYJ2* (120km) Mont le Soie (BEL): 12th with Hasnar
- 2013: CEI1* (100km): Schweich (LUX): 2nd with Wamid
CEI2* (120km) Ermelo (NED), 4th with Eomer
CEI3* (160km) Abu Dhabi, Al Wathba (UAE): 45th with Wamid
CEI2* (120km) Sartilly – World championships qualification: 9th with Ouadji
- 2014: CEI3* (160km) Abu Dhabi, Al Wathba (UAE) : 37th with Nubie du Florival
CEI1* (90km) Bierbeek (BEL): 18th with Ben Hur Florival
CEI3* (160km) Numana: 5th with Laiza de Jalima
- 2015: CEI3* (160km) Abu Dhabi Presidents Cup, Al Wathba (UAE): 25th with Tess du Melay
CEI2* (120km) Fontainbleau: 25th with Akis de Presle
CEI2* (120km) Ermelo: 1st with Laiza de Jalima
CEI2* (120km) Compiègne: 7th with LI Kohira
CEI2* (120km) Hanslope (UK): 1st with Laiza de Jalima

Dutch National Championships:

- 2011 Silver medal CEIYR2* (120 km) with Noumea des Sauvlons

European Championships:

- 2012 Mont le Soie (BEL) (120km) Young riders: 4e with Eomer
2013 European Championships Seniors (160 km) Most: 12th with Wamid
2014 European Championships Seniors (160km) Verona:
11th with Akis de Presle

World Championships:

- 2011 Abu Dhabi (UAE) Young riders: 17th with Eomer
2013 Tarbes (France) Young riders:
Silver medal with Eomer
2014 Normandy (France) Seniors CEI**** 160 km:
Silver medal with Laiza de Jalima

Awards:

- 2015 Best Female Endurance rider in the world
HH Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak Darley Awards
2014 Sportswoman of the year, Soest (NL)
2013 Sportswoman of the year, Soest (NL)

