

Hartpury CPEDI3*

International Champion

“I have always dreamed of winning an international and always imagined what it would be like hearing the national anthem play. Well thanks to my amazing horse, mine and my team’s hard work my dream has become a reality”!

“The last few days have been incredible and I have enjoyed every minute”.

Tuesday 3rd July

The Lorry was loaded with Sky on board and we headed off to Hartpury College. Sky travelled really well and flew through the vet check.

We settled him into his stable before our slot for the arena familiarisation; this is a chance to ride in the warm up and competition arena before the competition starts tomorrow. As I am a Grade 1 rider and can only walk Rob my trainer is allowed to warm the horse up for me. I then had a short session getting Sky’s confidence in the arena and giving him a chance to have a look at everything in preparation for the competition (there were lots of flowers!!).

Sky trotted up like a pro and passed with flying colours.

Wednesday 4th July.

On the first day of competition we rode the Team Test. I really struggle with spatial awareness and so we spend a lot of time looking at the arenas and finding objects (flowers/banners) that I can ride my 8m circles to.

Sky was looking very shiny especially with his GB quarter markers. Rob has to get on Sky at the warm up arena so the steward can time how long he is on for as trainers are only allowed a maximum of 30 minutes in a day. Sky looked amazing, I then got on and went straight into the holding arena. It was extremely hot but Sky was being his usual self and felt really good.

My time came and I entered the arena with a big smile on my face. The test went really well and I was pleased as were my support team. It was extremely hot and my body struggled to cope, breathing was extremely difficult. But it was a good first test to set of our international competition.

My score came up and we were a bit disappointed to see that it was under 70% and I wondered why. When we had a look at the individual judges marks we saw why one judge had pulled me right down, but that’s dressage for you. I still finished 3rd and was extremely close to coming 2nd and getting 70%.

Thursday 5th July.

Second day of competition - the Individual Test.

Sky headed off to the arena with Rob, his warm up seemed to go very fast and before long it was my turn to get on. This time I got on in the warm up arena and then went into the holding arena.

The minute we set foot in the arena Sky seemed to rise to the occasion and felt super, we had the extra connection that we had not had the day before. We finished the test and thankfully my body held off having a major meltdown until the end. When we exited the arena everyone was clapping and even the stewards were all saying well done and what a wonderful test it was.

Job well done and time to see what the judges felt; as there was a live stream one of my friends said ‘oh my word that was amazing well done’. She had seen my score and then told me that I was in the lead with one more to go! We had scored over 71%. The wait to see what the final

person got felt like hours not minutes but finally it was up they had gone into 4th place which meant we had won!!

My feelings straight after finding out I had won: "Lost for words. Over the moon. We only went and won the Individual Test with over 71%!! It's a dream come true. I cannot thank my whole team enough and my super-duper horse Sky who I love so much and am so proud of! Our first ever international win"

At the prize giving we all lined up in order and I was at the top of the line an amazing feeling looking down and knowing I had beaten a triple Paralympic gold medalist and a rider on the world class programme plus others. Hearing the words "Mari Durward-Akhurst and Sky O'Hara first was pretty special" and I was given my prize by the president of the ground jury.

Mum then did the arena familiarisation for me with Sky ready for the next day as we were riding in the big international arena for our freestyle to music.

It was then time for the music sound check. I scootered down into the main arena to listen to my music.

Freestyle is meant to be fun but I always find that even though I really know my music it always seems to ride so different than at home

Friday 6th July.

Third and final day of competition - all the pressure is over and it's time to really enjoy ourselves.

I couldn't wait to get into the arena and dance with Sky - two international champions together! Mum warmed him up and then I got on. He felt amazing and we were ready to go.

It felt strange going into a test as an international champion but also a pretty good feeling. Sky felt amazing; he loves his music and always rises to the occasion. The bell went and my music started. We finished slightly ahead of my music (such a shame as it had been spot on the whole way through) but I was really pleased with our test and Sky felt super and really enjoyed himself.

Now the wait for results. My sister in America messaged me to say I had 73%+ as she had seen the online score board; I had won again! "I couldn't believe it another win"! This week couldn't get any better, so proud of Sky and my team.

Hearing the national anthem play was fantastic and brought tears to my eyes!

"Waking up as an International Champion the morning after was a wonderful feeling! Realising that all mine and my teams hard work has paid off and we have done it.

I cannot thank everyone enough who has supported me and continues to; so that I can continue to live my dream.