

# HICKSTEAD

*A Tribute to a Fallen Star*  
*By Geoff Young*

Philippe Le Jeune and Eric Lamaze give Hickstead a standing ovation after the horse cleared 44 jumps without a fault at the 2011 World Equestrian Games. Hickstead was named "Best Horse" at the Games. Photo by Evalyn Bemis



They said Hickstead was too small to jump like a top Grand Prix horse. Here he is flying sky high over the Liverpool at the WEG. Photo by Sharon McElvain

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It was all about his heart. The heart that carried him to world championships and numerous grand prix wins. The heart that propelled him to clear 44 fences without a single fault at the World Equestrian Games, and to be declared The Best Horse in the World. And in the end, when that heart failed, it broke the hearts of thousands of fans and equestrian athletes all over the world.

Nothing touches or inspires like the performance of an athletically gifted horse, and Hickstead touched us all, and left us in tears.

Greatness cannot always be seen, and certainly for Hickstead, that was apparent when he was a young horse. When he was

just two years old, the Dutch Warmblood Breeders' Association in the Netherlands refused to approve him for their studbook because its experts said he was too small and not powerful enough to go over the big jumps required of a Grand Prix horse.

Undersized at only 16-hands high, a bit high-strung, too small to jump and too wild to win, he was, at least for a time, a four-legged gamble that no one was willing to make. His breeders had offered him up to members of the U.S. equestrian team. They took a pass.

A Canadian rider then came along who saw what others couldn't. Perhaps it was because he recognized something similar and familiar in this horse that no one wanted. Perhaps he saw himself in this horse, a flawed creature with a desire to be a winner. They were two outcasts, arriving at a crossroads at the perfect time and place in the universe.

Eric Lamaze faced hurdles early in life that would make a puissance wall look like a stepping-stone. His mother was a



Hickstead, a "once in a lifetime" jumper, clears the fence named for a "once in a lifetime" racehorse. Photo by Sharon McElvain

drug addict and his father was a ghost, disappearing before he was born. He left school in the 8th grade, was raised by an alcoholic grandmother, and found himself on a farm at age 13, where his discovery of horses resonated within him, and he sought refuge in these animals, which probably saved him. A rocky road, however, was still in front of him, and it would take many years before he found solid footing in his life.

Lamaze became a gifted and accomplished rider for Canada, and was a budding superstar, but his career was derailed when he was disqualified from not one, but two Olympics for cocaine use. He cleaned up and was determined to make amends to Team Canada, his friends and family, and himself. People gave Eric second and third chances, and so, when traveling in Europe looking for a horse in 2004, he was given an opportunity to reciprocate the chances that had been given to him.



Eric Lamaze riding Hickstead en route to a gold medal at the Beijing Olympic Games. Photo by Kit Houghton/FEI



Eric Lamaze & Hickstead at the Spruce Meadows Masters in Calgary where they won the CN Grand Prix. Photo by Kit Houghton

One day after all but giving up in his search for a horse, his horse broker proposed going to see Hickstead. It was Lamaze's second look at the horse and by the time he arrived at the farm, it was 10pm.

Hickstead was brought out and acted every bit the hothead people said he was. He was on the verge of being unrideable. Eric recounted that night saying, "they brought the horse out and he was completely crazy." He had trouble even getting on Hickstead, but he took him through some jumps and realized that this horse's unruly power could be a strength, not a liability.

Lamaze decided to take a chance on Hickstead; after all, who knew better about being given a chance than the troubled rider from Canada.

The horse and rider started to mature into a beautifully balanced partnership. Hickstead had the ability to extend his

body to clear a rail, and to find the right angles in order to keep the poles up. What's more, with Eric aboard, Hickstead seemed to love to jump. Together, the two rode to victory after victory on the international circuit. In 2007, Lamaze became the first Canadian rider in 20 years to make the top ten in world rankings. By the time the 2008 Beijing Olympics rolled around, the two-time Olympic outcast and his hotheaded horse were unlikely medal contenders for Canada.

When the Olympic equestrian events in Hong Kong were over, Hickstead had carried Eric Lamaze to Individual Gold and Team Silver medals. The pair had accomplished the rare feat of only having one rail during the entire Olympic Games. The rider's horse had become his redemption.

For Eric, there will never be another Hickstead, although during an emotional press conference in Toronto, he said

he would try to look for another horse while contemplating his future. Speaking in Toronto, Lamaze said the pair was successful partly because they were so alike.

"I think we had a bit of the same personality," he said to reporters in French. "We both liked to win. We had the same energy that transformed itself into incredible things."

"He will probably never match that horse," said US Olympic Gold medalist McLain Ward. "I don't think there's been a better horse in this sport, ever."

This wild horse and troubled rider brought out the best in each other. No fence was too high, no world stage too big. Together they won \$3.7 million and fans all over the world. And in the end, at the World Cup in Verona, Italy, as Hickstead's powerful legs began to buckle because of a ruptured aorta, the horse, in one last effort to protect his rider, set



It was an emotional journey for Eric Lamaze to reach the top of the podium at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. With partner Hickstead, the pair gave Canada its first ever Individual Gold Medal in Showjumping. Photo by Kit Houghton/FEI

When we walk to the edge of all the light we have and step into the darkness of the unknown, we must believe one of two things will happen: we will have something solid to stand on, or we will be taught how to fly. Eric gave Hickstead that solid foundation to stand on, and in return, the horse taught Eric, and all of us, how to fly.

Eric off his back, gently on the ground. The video of those final seconds appears to show Hickstead giving Eric one final look before dying a very public death. It ripped the heart out of all of us.

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The partnership between Eric and Hickstead was one of redemption and determination. Photo by Sharon McElvain