

Andrew prevents an all-girl whitewash

ASTON-LE-WALLS (2)

GIRL power was very much in evidence in the advanced sections at the Mulberry Insurance Services-sponsored Aston-Le-Walls (2). The 'fairer sex' won six out of the seven sections with Mary King, Emily Baldwin, Sarah Cohen, Piggy French and Tina Cook all taking home a red rosette, while Lauren Shannon captured the top two spots in a hastily arranged mini section put on after the eleventh hour cancellation of Auchinleck.

Never one to be outdone, Andrew Nicholson flew the flag for the boys, winning section M with Philip Adkins' Parkmore Repechage.

Emily Baldwin managed to contain Drivetime's historical one-day exuberance to win section H on 38.4. The gelding looked to be back to his best after less than happy times at Badminton and Luhmühlen this year and Emily admitted that he made the show jumping and cross-country tracks at Aston feel easy.

"I wanted him to have a good run before Hartpury and he was fabulous. He was his usual fresh self in the dressage so we had an interesting mix of twos and nines."

Piggy French had set the early pace with the aptly-named Flying Machine but eventually had to settle for second, just behind the leader on 38.7. She went one better in section J, heading the leaderboard with her father Wally and Michael Underwood's Chase The Moon (see box) who clearly enjoys the terrain at Washbrook Farm for he won an OI section here earlier in the year.

The on form Sarah Cohen and Irish Jester claimed section I, the 10-year-old Boekelo or Blenheim-bound gelding proving once again that he is one of the most talented and consistent horses currently on the circuit.

"It's been a slow start to the season," said Sarah, referring to the issues she'd had regaining her core stability after giving birth to son Alfie six months ago. "But I'm back in the swing of things now. I'm such a perfectionist that I wanted to get myself right rather than have my lack of stability have an adverse effect on the horses."

"Jester's such a lovely horse and really quite special. He did a great test here today to score 29.6 and it's nice to be in that position as it slightly takes the pressure off the cross-country. That said, he didn't put a foot

wrong here and it was great to ride around a course that wasn't trappy or too tricky. I think it's important that horses have confidence-giving rounds every now and again. They don't need to be tricked and tested all the time."

Bridesmaid's slot for Sam

By capturing section K, Tina Cook and Miners Frolic ousted long-time leaders Sam Griffiths and Motion Bound. Tina had come to Aston fresh from three days of team training and

it was clear that the double Olympic bronze medalist remains as focussed as ever.

"He went well in all three phases today but there are still improvements to be made, particularly in the dressage as he continues to develop and get stronger. I'm certainly not going to the Europeans and beyond resting on my laurels but I'm lucky that he wants to try hard for me. He thrives on competition which is why we came here," said Tina, who is also aiming at Gatcombe — "depending

on the ground" — and Highclere prior to her trip to France.

Squad teammate Mary King had a slightly more exciting time aboard Sue and Eddie Davies and Janette Chinn's eight-year-old Fernhill Urco, who was previously partnered by Duarte Seabra. The grey gelding's warmblood lines were in evidence in the first phase, where he posted a score of 29.5, but he was over-brave at times across the country, giving Mary a couple of scary moments.

Mary also led section M after the dressage with Kings Tempress but a show jump down and 5.2 cross-country time penalties eventually relegated them to fourth and allowed Andrew Nicholson and Parkmore Repechage to take the top spot.

Section X, which was added on Saturday morning following Auchinleck's cancellation, comprised just three riders. Lauren Shannon, Mark Kyle and Jamie Atkinson, who



Mary King notches up an advanced win with Fernhill Urco despite some occasional hairy moments during their cross-country round



Lauren Shannon and Quixotic win a hastily arranged advanced section X

rode seven horses between them. Leicestershire-based Lauren, now out of Young Riders, was the dominant force, piloting Quixotic and Zero Flight into first and second places respectively.

Nigel Taylor's cross-country track — which was welcomed by most for providing either a confidence-giving round for newly-upgraded horses or a 'no pressure' run for more experienced combinations — caused

few problems and riders were unfailingly complimentary about the efforts Nigel and his team go to every year to accommodate so many of them.

Sunshine throughout Saturday had dried out the well-prepared ground in places, prompting many riders to eschew trying to make the right time. The track was not without its questions, though, with the drop log to corner (fence 12), the drop log

to double of triangular bushes (16) and the bounce to water (20) all catching out a few. Pippa Funnell had a wet walk home when she parted company from Mirage d'Elle at the latter obstacle, while both Nick Gauntlett (Chapel Ambles) and Bruce Haskell (Not Kidding) picked up 20 penalties apiece when their mounts ran out at the b element of fence 16.

Several other combinations, including William Fox-Pitt with

Navigator and Mary King with Fernhill Urco, had sticky moments here as well when they jumped too big over the element on the bank.

The only serious casualty of the competition was American rider Mesgran Marinovich, who is based with the Taylors. She was airlifted to hospital for observation after parting company from Alherich at fence 11 but she was quickly given the all clear.

Sue Polley

ALL ABOUT... CHASE THE MOON

PIGGY French bought her advanced section J winner, the now nine-year-old gelding Chase The Moon, as a five-year-old from Karen Dixon. Taking things relatively slowly initially with the son of Royal Parsan, the British squad reserve rider has upped the ante this season, running him at CIC*** level for the first time and notching up some great placings, including two wins at OI level.

"There's nothing flashy about him at all," said Piggy of the Hartpury-bound horse who has been slow to develop both physically and mentally. "He's just a plain bay gelding but he's very producible and uncomplicated."



Andrew James and Cudlic Eari, advanced runners-up

