

Jockey mistake costs Gold Cup champ Mystic Strike a win at Saturday's Warrenton Point-to-Point

A champion's misstep opened the door for a novice winner

By Betsy Burke Parker Special to the Times

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Warrenton Point-to-Point: 100 horses to race at Airlie Saturday

Warrenton Hunt Point-to-Point was supposed to be a rubber-stamp match for defending Gold Cup champion Mystic Strike.

Trainer Todd McKenna said before his veteran's 2024 racecourse debut at Saturday's race that, at age 15 this year, Mystic Strike is "as good as he's ever been."

But after a rookie mistake from his pilot cost Mystic Strike the win, McKenna was at a loss for words.

Novice jockey Andrew Burke Ott – newly arrived to the American steeplechase circuit from his native Ireland – flubbed his first U.S. jump start. Ott sliced the final turn into the Airlie homestretch too close, missing a mandatory beacon in the process.

"I mean, you know the horse is good. Jumped good, ran good, looked good," McKenna said, at last weighing in after the patrol judges reviewed the replay tape and confirmed his horse was disqualified.

The winning margin — 8 lengths — more than made up for the few feet that were saved, but rules are rules, McKenna said.

"But I get it," he said. "He's off course. No trophy for us today."

The unexpected defeat in the Airlie headliner at Warrenton's 83rd annual Point-to-Point wasn't a big deal, McKenna said.



Lightning Rod jumped strongly to win over hurdles at Airlie on Saturday, March 16, 2024. Defending champion jockey Parker Hendriks was aboard.

Photo by Douglas Lees

As he congratulated de facto winner Stewart Strawbridge's Lap of the Gods, McKenna allowed that his team was still pleased by Mystic Strike's showing.

"I think he's as good as ever," McKenna said.

Champion jockey in 2022, Parker Hendriks opened his 2024 season strong, winning three races including aboard Lap of the Gods to the surprising open timber victory. Hendriks also scored with Lightning Rod for local owner-breeder Clarke Ohrstrom and trainer Laird George. George trains out of Ohstrom's Whitewood Farm north of The Plains. Hendriks also won with In Effect for Middleburg-based Neil Morris.

Apprentice rider Virginia Korrell handled another Ohrstrom homebred, Giantsbane, to win a division of the competitive maiden hurdle, a second on the card for Laird George.

It kicked off a banner meet for apprentice riders — those who have not won 10 sanctioned races over fences. Sarah Cundith won her very first steeplechase Saturday, partnering Bon Nouvel Chasing's Karl Carres to win the novice timber for trainer Julie Gomena.

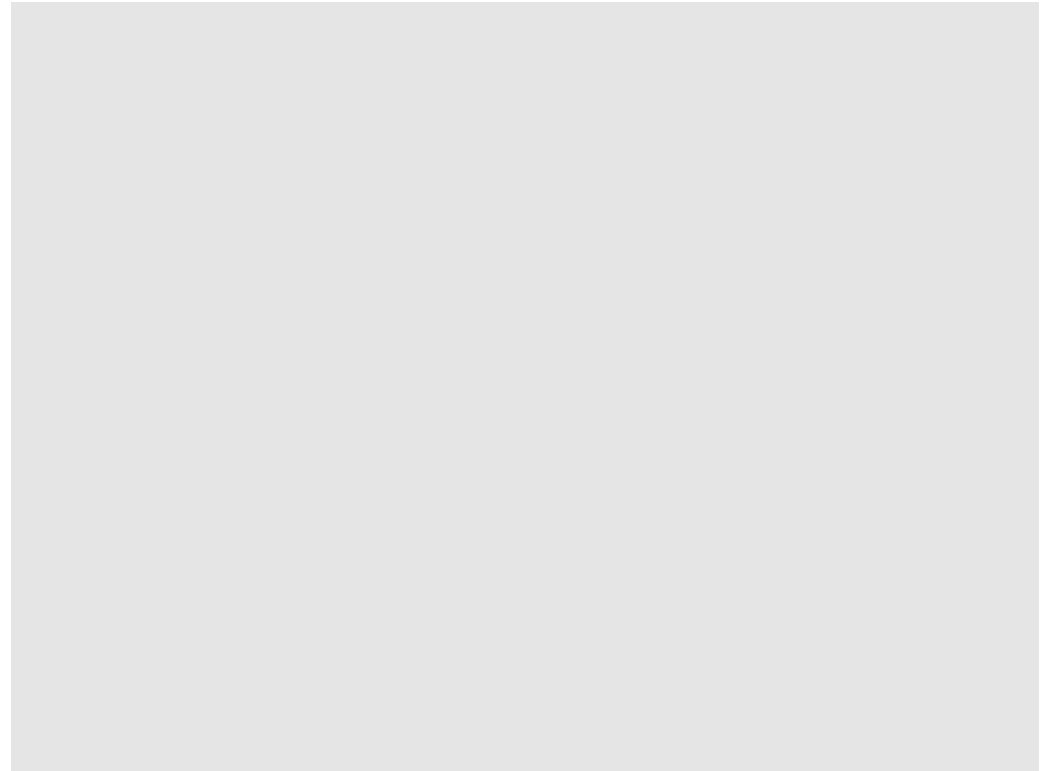
Cundith said in racing, as in life, many contribute to any single success.

She said her personal journey has included many mentors, Gomena being one of them.

“The way you get good is by experience,” said Cundith, 25. “The way you get that experience is just to ride as many horses for as many people as you can.”

Cundith started out in the eventing world, but transitioned to steeplechasing last year.

“I can’t identify one single horseman that’s made the most impression,” she said, “they’ve all taught me something.”



Apprentice jockey Sarah Cundith won her first race over fences at Saturday, March 16, 2024’s Warrenton Hunt Point-to-Point.

Photo by Douglas Lees

Cundith has ridden out for Virginia trainers including Richard Valentine, Neil Morris, Doug Fout and Gomena, and galloped and worked last summer in New York for Hall of Fame flat trainer Bill Mott.

Cundith and Karl Cares were narrow winners from Hendriks on Spring Heeled Jim. Asked how it feels to “beat” the champion jock at his own game, Cundith laughed.

“You don’t really think of it that way,” she said. “You’re aiming to give your own horse the best go possible, to get them confidence. Karl Cares went really well, jumped great, finished strong, so, I guess that is pretty fun to beat the champ. Okay, I admit it.”

The point-to-point is steeplechasing’s version of spring training, and trainers and jockeys had praise for Warrenton’s event.

“Warrenton Hunt does an outstanding job,” said trainer Mark Beecher, who traveled from his Maryland base with four veteran ‘chasers making their 2024 racecourse debuts. “The course is good, the conditions are right and the (mid-March) date is a perfect set-

up for these horses – older veterans tuning up and younger horses learning the ropes, and the ones headed into the spring NSA circuit. It's just what we need this time of year.”

Parker Hendriks added that the point-to-point circuit, which centers around the Virginia Piedmont, Maryland's Hunt Valley and Pennsylvania's Brandywine Valley, acts as the sport's proving grounds.

“The (organizers) do such a fantastic job making it just right to ‘get a good run,’” he said. “Same for the horsemen.”

Steeplechasing moves to Upperville for the March 23 Piedmont Foxhounds Point-to-Point. Complete Warrenton results and information on the Piedmont races are at **centralentryoffice.com**.