

Brazilian records historic trifecta

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First there was soccer's Pele. Then there were mad bomber Oscar Schmidt in basketball and the great Formula One racer Ayrton Senna.

But the biggest sports icon in Brazil these days may very well be a 28-year-old show-jumping horse rider named Rodrigo Pessoa.

Pessoa became the first person in the 22-year history of the prestigious World Cup Final to "three-peat" on Sunday, finishing with a unblemished mark of no faults en route to victory in the Budweiser World Cup 2000 at the Thomas & Mack Center.

Pessoa, who also won the event in 1998 in Helsinki and last year in Gothenburg, Sweden, rode stallion Gandini Baloubet du Rouet to all three titles.

"Will (Pessoa's record) ever be broken?" World Cup Director Max Ammann was asked.

"If you believe that sports will still be going on in the year 3000 or 4000 or 5000 like I do, well, yes, I'm sure it will be broken one day," Ammann replied. "But it's going to take a great rider and a great horse and luck to do it."

Pessoa, the lead story on ESPN Brazil --- yes, they sent a crew here to cover the event similar to the way the United States' ESPN sends reporters to the Final Four, Super Bowl or World Series --- had all three going for him during his week in Las Vegas.

The gold medal favorite for this summer's Olympics in Sydney, Pessoa thought for a while he might not have his prize stallion to ride when the horse arrived in Las Vegas on April 15 with a fever. But that was nothing compared to sweat coming from anxious promoters who were worried the Tiger Woods of their sport might not be around to defend his crown.

"But he started to get better and stronger each day," Pessoa said. By Sunday, Pessoa's only problem with controlling his horse was during his victory lap as a crowd of 10,301 gave the duo a loud standing ovation.

Pessoa completed the first round of competition without any problems and went out for the day's final ride with a 7.5-point lead over runner-up Markus Fuchs of Switzerland.

That meant Pessoa could have knocked down one rail for a four-point fault and still won. Knock down two rails and he would have had his streak snapped.

And on his first jump of the final round, Gandini Baloubet du Rouet brushed a rail. However, it didn't fall and Pessoa went on to finish the event without a fault.

"I've never done that before," Pessoa said of his perfect World Cup performance.

As for his near fault at the start of the final round, Pessoa said, "It was not a light rub. He hit it pretty good but it stayed. It sort of woke him up a little bit.

"He's a horse with unbelievable quality. He's allergic to wood I think. Considering the condition he was in when he arrived here, he did a great job."

*** WORLD CUP NOTES:** Both Ammann and Robert Maxey, chairman of the Las Vegas Events Organizing Committee, were ecstatic with the way the event unfolded. Almost 36,000 people --- many of them from European countries --- attended the five-day event, including more than 20,000 for the final two days. Las Vegas Events has 30 days to exercise an option to host future World Cups in 2003, 2005 and 2007. That will be voted on in mid-May. "It definitely looks positive," Maxey said. "I don't know how it could be any more positive. But we use room-tax money to produce these events. We need feedback from the industry, from the hotels, before we make any decisions. But I would be shocked if they didn't like it." Maxey said tickets to the event were sold to people from 48 of the 50 states as well as more than two dozen countries. ... Pessoa will try for a grand slam at World Cup 2001 in Gothenburg, Sweden on April 11-15. ... Todd Minkus of Lake Forest, Ill., was the highest finishing American, tying for sixth place. ... Canada's Mario Deslauriers entered the day in fifth place but was eliminated when his horse, Le Madro, slipped negotiating a turn. Another rider, Geoff Billington of Great Britain, got DQ'd for going off course. Billington was 11th entering the final round. ... ESPN2 will air the replay of Sunday's final at 11 a.m. April 30. ... Pessoa garnered \$65,000 for the win.