



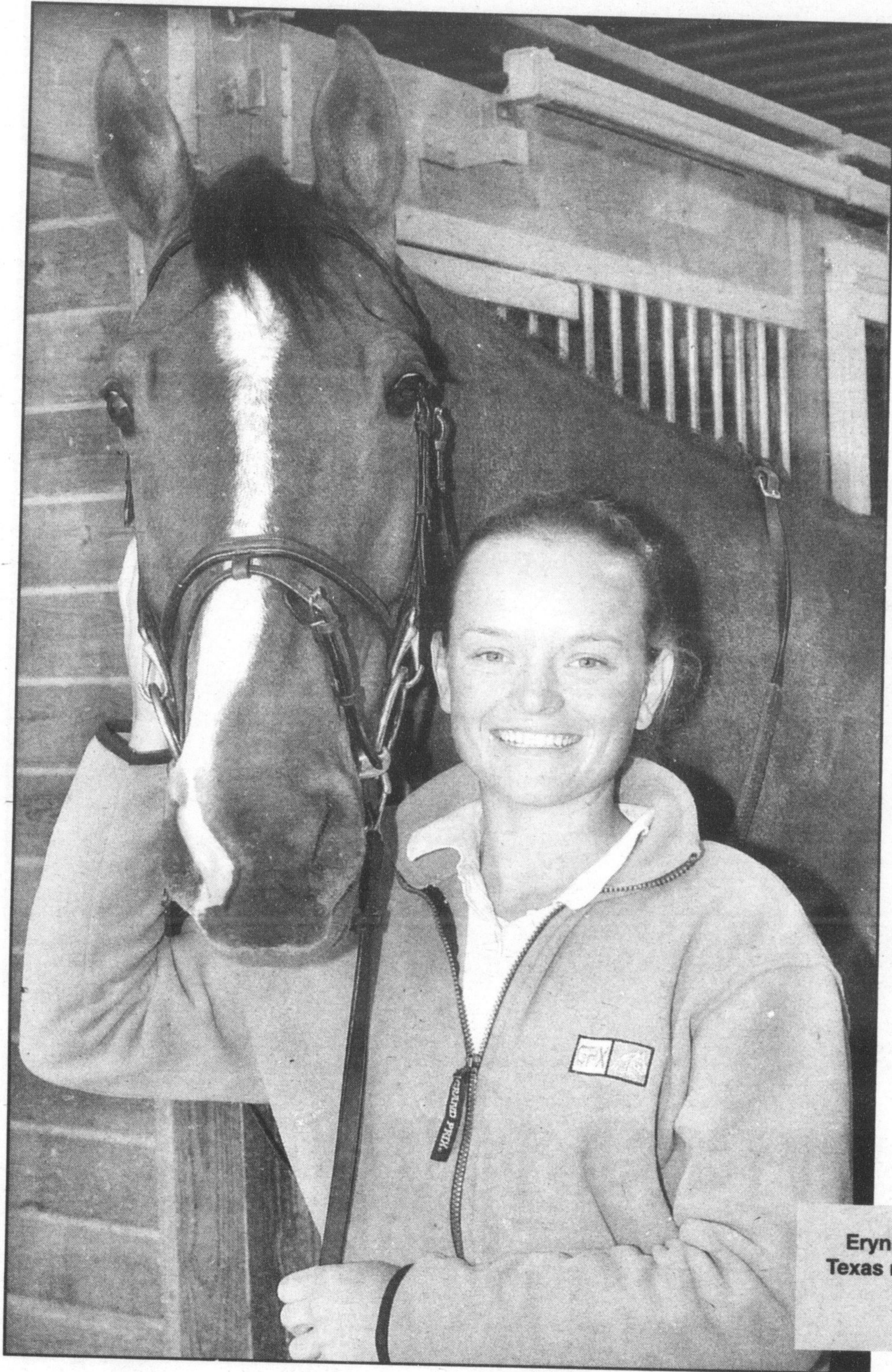
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FRIDAY APRIL 18, 2003

Ballard, Leacock scorch competition in Texas



Long-time equestrian partners highlight spring campaign with grand prix jump-off victory

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
The Champion

In Texas, it's go big or go home. Recently Erynn Ballard opted for the former.

Highlighting a hugely successful Lone Star State swing in Katy March 29, Hornby's 22-year-old equestrian advanced three of four entries to a nine-horse jump-off in the \$30,000 Pin Oak Grand Prix.

Then she and 12-year-old Irish thoroughbred Leacock — who've teamed together for nearly a decade now — delivered a second straight clear round in 30.88 seconds to reign supreme among an overall field of 29.

Just winning the high-profile event was, to say the least, a thrill for the local show jumper. But doing so with her longest-serving partner made it all the more rewarding.

"It's definitely sweeter (winning with Leacock)," said Ballard, who placed third with Esprit d'Amour and seventh with Ramirique Royale. "Always he's my most important horse."

Ballard and Leacock's recent triumph was their biggest since taking top honours at the 1999 North American Young Riders' Championship.

"Now he's done everything," she said.

The life-long equestrian stressed that having three horses in a jump-off of this magnitude certainly got her adrenaline going.

And with each horse bringing a little something different to the table, guiding them all through back-to-back rounds offered a unique challenge.

Recalled Ballard, "In the first round, everything seemed to be working, I was in the groove. In the jump-off, Esprit d'Amour was clean again, but he's a big horse and I need a little more time to set him up for the jumps, so our time was a little slow. With Leacock, he's natu-

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ERYNN BALLARD

rally quick so I went as I could without having any faults. It turned out to be Leacock's night, which was fun."

The speedy thoroughbred had enjoyed a number of strong showings since prevailing at Young Riders, but hadn't won the 'big one' until last month.

"To have brought him along and now see him get to that next step is amazing," said Ballard.

Just four days after topping the Pin Oak Grand Prix, she and Leacock added a \$5,000 Open Welcome title to their resume, while later in the week the duo had one rail down to finish fifth in a \$25,000 Grand Prix.

While Leacock was the top dog — make that horse — during the three-week Texas tour, Ballard's other entries showed strongly as well.

Ramirique Royale was particularly impressive during week one in Houston, taking second-place honours in a \$10,000 Open Welcome. Esprit d'Amour was eighth in this event.

Ramirique Royale and Esprit d'Amour then finished second and seventh respectively at the \$10,000 Open Welcome in Katy.

"These three weeks are always going to stand out and be special," said Ballard, who returned home last week and begins competing on Canadian soil early next month in Palgrave.

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Erynn Ballard and trusty partner Leacock are all smiles after a successful swing through Texas recently. They highlighted the three-week tour with a grand prix win on March 29.

Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

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