



THE OLYMPICS OF FLORAL DESIGN

Floral artists from 23 nations compete in the FTD World Cup with dazzling results.

By **Debra Prinzing**

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The Olympics have always been a big deal in my house. We get hyped up about the track-and-field events, and every four years, my husband travels with his college track buddies to attend the Olympics in person, cheering for world-class athletes as they vie for the gold. Now that I've witnessed the floral community's version of the Olympics, I am equally charged up.

There are so many superlatives I could draw out of my writer's bag of adjectives to describe the event. Suffice it to say that the **FTD/Interflora/Fleurop World Cup**, held March 1-3, at the **Philadelphia Flower Show**, was a mind-blowing experience.

The floral design profession's top prestigious event, held on the global stage, the World Cup showcases the most talented floral designers in the world. The international floral competition is held approximately every four to six years, hosted in a different country each time.

Florists' Transworld Delivery (FTD) hosted the world-class competition for the first time in the U.S. since 1985, when it took place in Detroit, Mich. This year's competition, named **FTD World Cup 2019** in recognition of the event's host organization, included representatives from 23 countries.

"It is said to be the 'Olympics of Floral Design,' and it's regarded as a career-defining competition since the winner is extremely sought after for demonstrations, presentations and workshops throughout the world," says **Emily Bucholz**, director of marketing communications, FTD Florist Division. "The FTD team has had a great sense of pride being able to bring the World Cup competition to the U.S. for the first time in 34 years. Our goals were to unite the international floral community in our great nation and to introduce our North American florists to the incredible floral design talent throughout the world."

Over three days, on a public stage witnessed by the floral community and flower show attendees, competitors produced the profession's best expression of their craft, each one a national winner in his or her own right. Their level of floral artistry, precise execution of technique and highly personal interpretation of each challenge was a delight to watch.

Australia's **Bart Hassam** was named the **2019 World Cup Champion** at the conclusion of the three-day competition filled with six distinct design challenges.

Hassam, a resident of Brisbane, is a professional floral designer



(Opposite page and above) The floral universe took center stage at the 2019 Philadelphia Flower Show, March 1-3, where up to 25,000 show-goers per day were introduced to the FTD World Cup and floral artists from 23 nations.

and active floristry competitor. He has won the **Interflora Australia Florist of the Year Competition** five times and the **2011 Intercontinental Asia Cup**. He exhibits, demonstrates and teaches floral design around the world.

Competition aside, the community spirit infused the entire experience. After winning, Hassam said that one of his favorite moments about competing in the World Cup was spending time with other floral designers from all over the world. "Some of them were already friends, and now I've made new friends, too. It's always interesting to see how they work with flowers – and how they are as people, too."

Each floral designer completed four preliminary design tasks, followed by a semifinal round featuring 10 competitors. Then, five finalists created their final design task live, on stage, at a gala event with 650 guests. Hassam was named champion at the conclusion of the evening alongside first runner-up **Natalia Zhizhko** from Russia and second runner-up **Tamás Mezöffy** from Hungary.

As a World Cup competitor, the experience is unforgettable, Zhizhko says. "My favorite memories about competing are the beginning and final moments of designing each task," she explains. "At first, there is the moment when you are fully concentrated – the moment that you have prepared yourself for, for a few months, when one invents and experiments as a designer, looking for solutions and choosing flowers. And then there are those few seconds when you inhale, exhale and start working. Suddenly, it seems, there is a final countdown – three, two, one – and you see your work complete."

Covering the World Cup for *Florists' Review* gave me a front-row seat to watch each of the competitors as they created such unique and inventive floral pieces.

Like the Olympics, the designers were evaluated on their artistic and technical work. I asked **Deborah De La Flor**, AIFD, PFCI, of **De La Flor Gardens** in Cooper City, Fla., if the focus on floral design as an art form worthy of competition is on the rise in North America. As a member of the 2019 FTD World Cup Jury, De La Flor is a former World Cup competitor (2004 Melbourne) and Jury (2015 Berlin).

"Yes, designers here are ready to show their creativity in the art of floral design," she said. "The interest in competition has risen with the introduction of the **Gateway to the America's Cup** and **FTD America's Cup**. Many florists have embraced this type of competition where they can showcase their creativity. There are several competitions in the U.S., but at different levels of creative ability – local, state, national and even international – with FTD/Interflora/Fleurop World Cup being the premier competition."

I ran into several friends who traveled to Philadelphia to witness the competition and support competitors **Katharina Stuart, AIFD**, of the U.S., and **Paul Jaras, AIFD**, of Canada. Until this year, for most members of the profession who volunteered, assisted or attended the World Cup, few had only heard about the competition.

Why did they attend? "I knew I would be able to see the work of 23 highly skilled inspirational designers – most of whom I've followed for years," said **Susan McLeary**, of Ann Arbor, Mich.-based **Passionflower Events**. "I couldn't resist being present to cheer them on and to witness their craftsmanship and ingenuity firsthand. While there, I felt my heart swell with pride for our profession, and I left inspired to continue pushing myself to be a more knowledgeable, artful florist. I'm so inspired!"

It was fun to see **Rebecca Raymond, EMC**, of Seattle-based **Rebecca Raymond Floral**, on the same flight I took to Philadelphia. I asked her about the motivation to fly across the U.S. to see the World Cup. Raymond credits mentor **Hitomi Gilliam, AIFD, EMC**, for urging her to attend. "She told me that her first World Cup experience changed her approach to floral design altogether and opened her eyes to new possibilities as a designer. I trusted Hitomi's word, so I knew I had to make the trip happen."

When I asked Raymond what she found especially inspiring, she singled out World Cup Champion Bart Hassam. "I believe we will begin to see a shift in U.S. design from full and abundant to more precise and clean lines. Bart's designs were unique, bold, intricate and clean. The use of large, bold plant materials is already on the rise, and Bart's winning designs will likely influence that. His use of tropical plants has a new appreciative audience!"

McLeary was particularly inspired by the work of Swedish designer **Sofie Danielsson Söhr**, finding her delicate hand-tied bouquet entry a favorite element of the World Cup. "I predict that this essential beautiful skill will enjoy a renaissance and that we will see large, airy, meadowlike hand-tied bouquets for brides to carry or to display on stands for ceremony décor or in tall glass vases for centerpieces."

Jimmy Lohr, CEO of Pittsburgh-based **greenSinner**, was impressed by the level of execution down to the smallest of details. "I loved seeing how the most magical pieces are usually based on the simplest of materials. I think it was **Hervé Frézal** of France who hid tiny test tubes into a beautiful lichen-covered branch. So simple. So genius. It brought me joy that sustainable techniques were given some of the spotlight."

Lohr observed the way flower-show attendees responded to such a high level of floral design. "I loved the approachability of so many people who were in the crowd. Strangers were talking to each other about a shared experience. It was something magical."

Gilliam, a floral educator, judge and veteran of floral design competition, believes that holding the World Cup at a public

venue will go a long way to educating and energizing consumer awareness. As for the aesthetic influence on the North American design community, she notes: "The competition reflects the art of 'paring down' – a step closer to less is more. This direction has already been happening during the past year or so, with designs that have more transparency rather than those that are heavy and massive. Bart Hassam showed the effectiveness of this concept – design that is cleaner and crisper, with contrasting forms. He dared to be bold and intriguing, have a sense of adventure, and use unique products. Our eyes have been opened to the wonders of botanicals – the adventure in horticultural shapes and lines that are more clearly visible and stunningly curated."

Like others, Virginia-based floral designer and educator **Holly Heider Chapple**, of **Holly Chapple Flowers**, felt moved to see the World Cup because of its once-in-a-lifetime appeal. "It's very good for me to see that level of art. This level of competition just makes me think bigger, bolder and stronger. It was incredible, and I'm inspired to find more time and to dig a little deeper to experience other avenues in this industry and profession. I know that floral design is an art. It is very clear, when you see those types of pieces, that it is absolutely 100 percent art."

Ellen Seagraves, AIFD, of Bethesda, Md.-based **Chic Florals**, is a regular attendee of the Philadelphia Flower Show, but she acknowledges that seeing the World Cup is a floral designer's dream come true. "The aesthetics of the floral artworks are not that well known in this country, and it was thrilling to see them presented at the flower show," she says. "The use of man-made structures as an integral part of floral design is something I'm excited to explore further."

Leanne Kesler, AIFD, PFCI, founder of **Floral Design Institute** in Portland, Ore., likens training for the World Cup to testing for the AIFD designation. She advocates for competition and testing to elevate the profession and sees the World Cup as a timely example.

"We are clearly witnessing an increase in public interest in floral design competition. This is a result of the increasing consumer demand for flowers and good floral design. I would love to see more small competitions, which give designers a 'first-time' opportunity because, for any floral designer, the first competition takes courage and is the most difficult. Yet it results in the greatest growth and personal satisfaction that any designer will ever know."

World Cup veteran De La Flor believes this year's competition will have lasting impact and influence on the profession. "I think it will inspire more artistic designs that are stylized, using some of the techniques we've seen in the World Cup. Perhaps it's a color combination or certain products blending from the vessel to the florals. There are florists creating gorgeous and unique designs for event work now. The World Cup has lit a fire for designers to want to create structures to showcase our glorious floral product."



Kelvin Lee, Chinese Taipei / Design #1



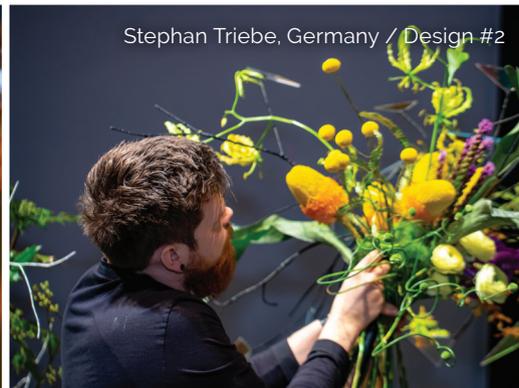
Leopoldo Gomez, Mexico / Design #1



Hans Zijstra, Netherlands / Design #1



Wei Yao, China / Design #2



Stephan Triebe, Germany / Design #2



Sofie Danielsson Söhr, Sweden / Design #2



Sofie Danielsson Söhr, Sweden / Design #3



Bart Hassam, Australia / Design #3



Katharina Stuart, AIFD, United States / Design #3

FTD World Cup Design Challenges

DAY ONE

PRELIMINARY ROUND: DESIGN #1

Time limit: 2 hours

Theme: "Designer's Choice – Harmony in Architecture"

Description: This design should express the following saying, "In pure architecture, the smallest detail should have a meaning or purpose." – Augustus W. N. Pugin

PRELIMINARY ROUND: DESIGN #2

Time limit: 1.5 hours

Theme: "Hand-tied Bouquet – Strength of Color"

Description: It is said that color speaks all languages. In this design, competitors are challenged to create a hand-tied bouquet that speaks to an observer and demonstrates how color and light are inseparable. They have to illustrate how light creates color in nature. "When the color achieves richness, the form attains its fullness also." – Paul Cezanne

DAY TWO

PRELIMINARY ROUND: DESIGN #3

Time limit: 2 hours

Theme: "Table for Two – The Power of Flowers"

Description: Flowers have the power to transform lives. In this design, competitors are challenged to create an entire table setting for two that interprets this life-changing transformation through love and hope. They have to produce a unified composition where the power of love is featured through flowers. Additionally, the design should stimulate at least four out of five human senses. "Love recognizes no barriers. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls to arrive at its destination full of hope." – Maya Angelou



Wei Yao, China / Design #4



Laura Leong, United Kingdom / Design #4



Kelvin Lee, Chinese Taipei / Design #4



Vincenzo Antonuccio, Italy / Design #5



Pirjo Koppi, Finland / Design #5



Přemysl Hytych, Czech Republic / Design #5



Přemysl Hytych, Czech Republic / Design #5



Bart Hassam, Australia / Design #5



Natalia Zhizhko, Russia / Design #5

PRELIMINARY ROUND: DESIGN #4

Time limit: 1.5 hours

Theme: Surprise Package "Season of Bloom"

Sponsored by Certified American Grown Flowers

Description: Spring is a season of new beginnings and growth. As the ground begins to thaw, spring flowers emerge from their winter rest to start a new cycle of life. Their blooms remind us that time marches on. In this task, designers are challenged to use the gorgeous Certified American Grown fresh product to demonstrate the cycle of life through spring's blooming. "World Cup was a great opportunity for Certified American Grown to highlight the ability for our farms to supply flowers and greens 365 days a year," says **Anna Kalins** of the organization. "A beautiful variety of outstanding, homegrown flowers and greens were used, and designers commented on the products' high quality. Our sponsorship certainly helped 'wave the flag' for our American Grown flowers and greens while the World Cup was hosted here in the United States."

DAY THREE

SEMIFINAL ROUND: DESIGN #5 (10 contestants)

Time limit: 2 hours

Theme: Surprise Package "Strength of Character" Designer's Choice

Description: Trees are a symbol of strength and growth. Their roots grow deep into the earth to provide a strong foundation for the tree. Use this tree or trees to show us your strength as a floral designer and how you have grown as a floral artist. "Strength and growth come only through continuous effort and struggle." – Napoleon Hill

FINAL ROUND: DESIGN #6 (five contestants)

Time limit: 45 minutes

Theme: Surprise Package "Influence of Geometric Form" Designer's Choice

Description: Art is filled with geometric shapes and forms. The circle is the reflection of eternity. It has no beginning, and it has no end. In this task, designers are challenged to show how geometric forms have influenced nature. "I think the universe is pure geometry – basically, a beautiful shape twisting around and dancing over space-time." – Antony Garrett Lisi



Bart Hassam, Australia / Design #6



Bart Hassam, Australia / Design #6



Tamas Mezöffy, Hungary / Design #6



Přemysl Hytych, Czech Republic / Design #6



The 10 semifinalists



PARTICIPANTS

Australia

BART HASSAM, **Champion**

Canada

PAUL JARAS, AIFD

China

WEI YAO, **Semifinalist**

Chinese Taipei

KELVIN LEE

Czech Republic

PŘEMYSL HYTYCH, **Finalist**

Denmark

KRISTINE GUDIYSEN

Finland

PIRJO KOPPI, **Semifinalist**

France

HERVÉ FRÉZAL

Germany

STEPHAN TRIEBE, **Finalist**

Hong Kong

SOLOMON LEONG

Hungary

TAMÁS MEZŐFFY, **Second Runner-Up**

Italy

VINCENZO ANTONUCCIO, **Semifinalist**

Japan

KAZUHIRO SUGIMOTO, **Semifinalist**

Korea

MYEON OH, **Semifinalist**

Mexico

LEOPOLDO GÓMEZ

Netherlands

HANS ZIJLSTRA

Norway

ELIN SUSAN HAVREBERG

Russia

NATALIA ZHIZHKO, **First Runner-Up**

Spain

LINA ROIG

Sweden

SOFIE DANIELSSON SÖHR

United Kingdom

LAURA LEONG

United States of America

KATHARINA STUART, AIFD

Vietnam

NAM BAO ■

WHAT'S NEXT? According to FTD's Bucholz, "There are already countries lining up to potentially host the next World Cup." The Interflora board will make a decision in the near future, so start saving your airline miles, and I hope to see you there.

(Top right) FTD World Cup Winners, from left: Tamás Mezöffy, Hungary (2nd runner-up); Bart Hassam, Australia (champion); and Natalia Zhizhko, Russia (first runner-up)