

Melanie Weal:

THE SUCCESSFUL PONY GRAND PRIX RIDER TALKS ABOUT THE 2010/2011 SEASON AND HER FUTURE EQUESTRIAN DREAMS.

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Over the years, Te Awamutu based Melanie Weal, has become a familiar face on the New Zealand show jumping circuit, and is fiercely competitive in Pony Grand Prix events up and down the country. Show Circuit managed to sit down with Melanie for a few minutes between competitions to discuss her goals, training secrets and how she got to where she is today.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: How long have you been riding now? When did you start competing?

Melanie Weal: I started show jumping five years ago although I was riding long before that. My granddad bought me my first pony when I was just 18 months old. I spent many years hacking around at home and pony club, not committing to any discipline in particular and then I fell into show jumping really. I just decided to give it a go one day and things progressed from there. Before long I was hooked and didn't want to focus on any other sport. It was show jumping all the way. I started competing my first show jumping pony, 'The Phantom Warrior', when I was nine years old and we're still going strong today. I come from an extremely horsey family so it's no wonder I've ended up the way I have. My parents used to train racehorses and dad's cousin, Christine Weal, is a well known horsewoman, particularly in New Zealand dressage and showing circles.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Why are you so passionate about show jumping? What keeps you competing again and again?

Melanie Weal: I love show jumping... A huge appeal to me is the fact that the competitions are fairly judged, on faults rather than opinion. If I don't do as well as I would like, I know it's down to an error of judgement on my behalf or a lazy rail, rather than what someone else thinks of my horse. The jump offs are one of my favourite parts- the adrenaline is sky high and there's the challenge of getting tighter corners than everyone else. It's often not the fastest pony that wins - it's the one who covers the least ground. There's nothing else like it.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Which ponies do you have on your team?

Melanie Weal: I'm very lucky to be competing some top notch ponies this season. I have 'Hopeful Illusion', 14.2hh, 10 year old Appy mare



without a tail, who is owned by my grandparents, Trevor and Mary Payne. 'Hope' is the most amazing pony. She is so scopey and loves her job. I also have 'The Phantom Warrior,' a 14.2hh, 13 year old bay gelding. He is part of the family and is practically human. He loves his jumping and is a jump off king. He watches me walk the course and has been known to turn before me! He loves getting his ribbon. Finally, there is 'He's Sweet Az,' a 14.2hh, 6 year old palomino gelding. He has been broken in for a year now but hasn't done a lot. He has an awesome jump and will be one to watch in the future - like his name says, he is sweet as! I bought him in November and am so pleased with his progress. He recently jumped in his first mini prix - he's my project. Along with those three ponies, I am lucky to have the ride on 'Last Spring' for James Cole.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Are you happy with how the season has gone so far?

Melanie Weal: I'm thrilled with how the year has progressed. We have picked up some outstanding results... So far I have won eight Grand Prix classes with 'Hopeful Illusion' and we have been placed a further 11 times. In total, with all the ponies, I have won 77 events this season. Moving forward, I would like to get more Grand Prix points but I really can't complain about the year we've had.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Do you follow any particular training or fitness regime with the ponies?

Melanie Weal: We are at shows most weekends so don't do much jump training with the ponies during the week. 'He's Sweet Az' gets a small amount of schooling over fences as he's still young. It mainly consists of a pole in front of a fence to keep him clean. 'Hopeful Illusion' is also occasionally worked over an oxer with a rail in front of it, especially if we've gone for time the previous weekend. It helps to keep her tidy. During the competition season, work for the ponies consists of flat work, track work and I'm very fortunate to be able to work them around the berry farm next door which the ponies really enjoy. Sometimes, one will be led off another to save time.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: What would you suggest looking for in a prospective top show jumping pony?

Melanie Weal: When I look for potential jumping ponies I consider their age and appearance for resale. I believe you need to look for scope and how they tuck up in front. At the end of the day you just have to try them to see what feels right and fits the bill.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Are you training with anyone particular at the moment? Who has had the most influence on your riding throughout your show jumping career?

Melanie Weal: I have had some very influential mentors and coaches over the years. I can't thank them enough for the help and support they have given me. Last winter, I trained with Jeff McVean and I'm keen to go back to him this winter. I have been working on my flatwork with Christine Weal which is really starting to pay off now. I also used to have lessons with Donna Smith. They've all been wonderful and have taught me so much. Christine made me ride without stirrups and tied my legs to my dressage saddle! Donna always said 'just do it!' And Jeff taught me the secret of how to see my stride.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: What has been the highlight of your show jumping career so far?

Melanie Weal: The best moment so far has been winning the two fence challenge at Woodhill Sands when 'Hopeful Illusion' and I cleared 1.50m, closely followed by winning the ***Tauranga Grand Prix recently.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: By the time this magazine goes to press, you will have ridden at the 2011 Horse of the Year. What are your hopes for the show?

Melanie Weal: At Horse of the Year, I'm hoping for a good place or even a win in the Pony of the Year class. I'd also like to take the Speed Pony of the Year again with 'Hopeful Illusion'. I won it last year with her and she won it the previous year with Amanda Pottinger. I'd love to clinch the trifecta for her. I've been competing at Horse of the Year for the past four years with 2010 being my first experience of the Pony of



the Year. I'm aiming to be a little less nervous this time around!

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Do you think you'll continue show jumping once you're out of the pony classes?

Melanie Weal: I'm certainly intending to be a part of the New Zealand show jumping scene for quite some time to come. I'm hoping to sell a pony at the end of the season so I can buy a hack to go into the junior rider classes with. I would eventually like to ride professionally but will be studying and gaining my academic qualifications so I have something to fall back on.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: What about the Olympics next year? Do you think the New Zealand show jumping team could be walking away with a medal?

Melanie Weal: I'm really looking forward to watching the Olympics in 2012- I think we have a real chance with Katie and Delphi. They are simply getting better and better and it has been great to watch them grow and progress as a combination. I can't wait to cheer the New Zealand team on!



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