

BARASTOC

Interview with Rachel Keskinen

WORDS: JENNIFER BOYES PHOTO: ©JULIE WISLON

Australian show rider Rachel Keskinen can't stop smiling and it's no wonder she recently pulled off a sensational double whammy at the 2011 Barastoc Horse of the Year Show, clinching both the Barastoc Horse of the Year title and the International Challenge Hack Championship. A few weeks later she took out Champion Open Small Hack at the RT Edgar Equestrian Victoria Show Horse State Titles at Werribee. Show Circuit caught up with her to find out whether it has all sunk in yet and what she's planning to do next.

SHOWCIRCUIT: So, how does it feel to have clinched both the Horse of the Year title along with the International Challenge Hack Championship at Barastoc? You must be over the moon!

Rachel Keskinen: It's hard to believe we have actually won both Barastoc, one of Australia's biggest events, and the state title. I'm still on cloud nine. My hack, Request was runner-up to the Barastoc winner Consequence last year, and in 2009 he won the Newcomer title, so to go the whole way this time is a dream come true.

SHOWCIRCUIT: What was going through your mind when you were performing your Horse of the Year workout?

Rachel Keskinen: I just focused on the way I needed to ride my horse in order to get the best possible work from him, drawing on all that I have learnt. It was one of the toughest top 10 finals I've been in...The quality and accuracy of the workouts meant there was no room for error. In fact, standards were so high in the final that the only error made was by one horse that stuck off on the wrong canter lead.

SHOWCIRCUIT: How many other horses were you up against? Can you explain the format of the Horse of the Year championship?

Rachel Keskinen: 75 horses were entered and around 65 of them started so it was a huge class. It took two hours and three heats to whittle the horses down. British judge Katie Jerram selected 4-5 from each preliminary heat in the morning and then those horses returned to the ring for the final ten to be selected.

Later that afternoon, we headed back to the main arena for the final. We were given a set workout to learn, a starting order, and then it was simply a case of watching and waiting for our turn. There were plenty of butterflies in my stomach waiting for



the results announcement. I sat, anxiously wondering whether I had produced a work out that would take the judges eye, and whether Request would be the 'type' of horse the English judges like. To win any event, takes a combination of both these aspects. The reserve champion horse was chosen and that's when the nerves really started to kick in. The results were announced, 'Request', Champion Barastoc Horse of the Year for 2011...it was unbelievable - we'd done it! The day itself was long. We started early in the morning and I eventually got out of the saddle at around 6pm. It's a big ask to expect the horse to keep performing well and retain that show ring presence but Request did me proud.

SHOWCIRCUIT: You also took out the International Challenge Championship on Saturday. What was the atmosphere like in the indoor arena?

Rachel Keskinen: The International Challenge is quite special as it is by invitation only, with a win at Barastoc the previous year being a prerequisite. It is held in the indoor arena during the evening and the riders perform a two minute musical freestyle.

The arena looked fantastic; the organisers had dressed it up according to an Australian theme with props, lights and a big back drop. Some horses would become quite hot and spooky in such a buzzy, electric atmosphere, but thankfully Request isn't too noise sensitive and doesn't mind the atmosphere of indoor arenas.

SHOWCIRCUIT: Which piece of music did you choose for your freestyle performance in the International Challenge?

Rachel Keskinen: I went with Dangerous, a new song by James Blunt. The music was almost a bit of a disaster as it didn't start playing when I entered the ring! A lap and a half behind scheduled starting time meant I had to change my workout slightly to make it all fit. Sometimes these things happen and you just have to keep going.

SHOWCIRCUIT: There were a lot of English judges at this year's Barastoc. Do you think that's a positive thing? Do you think it's useful to have international judges at Australian events?

Rachel Keskinen: All the International Challenge judges were English and there were also four English judges in the classes on Sunday. In fact, the hack preliminary judge and one of the finals judges, Katie Jerram, rides and takes care of the Queen's horses. She made a lovely comment, telling me that she would 'love to have a ride on Request and take him back to the UK with her.'

I believe international judges are really good for the Australian shows and bring a lot of diversity to the events. They contribute some fresh opinions to the ring.

SHOWCIRCUIT: Tell us a little bit about your hack, Request. Where did you find him? What makes him such a competitive show horse?

Rachel Keskinen: Request, known as Bart at home, is still a young horse, having just turned seven years old, and has only been under saddle for two years but he has come along in leaps and bounds. He was purchased in 2007 from Darryl, who is my instructor, and Lynda Hayes, who in turn had recently bought him from leading show jumping and racing trainer, Eric Musgrove and jumping and racing enthusiast, Lynne Simpson. He was originally bred for the racetrack and had a few starts but was obviously far too slow to make a champion

race horse. Apart from the attention he receives as a show horse, he would be perfectly happy to spend the rest of his life eating, sleeping and occasionally being taken out for a 15 minute ride! Request has classically good racehorse breeding so it's no wonder he's a quality, well put together horse. He is by Portland Pirate by Zabeel out of Spirit of Kingston that was by Bletchingly, out of Kingston Rose. His dam, Marble Princess, also comes from an impressive family, as she is by Bigstone (by Last Tycoon) out of the USA mare, Honey Bunny Baby that was by Tank's Prospect by Mr Prospector. He's great to ride, adores a crowd and loves to be in the show ring. Request isn't one of those horses that get upset or frightened when everyone starts clapping. He grows when people cheer and will stand all day to pose for the camera!

Show Circuit:

Things haven't always gone smoothly though have they? We hear you almost lost Request on a couple of occasions.

Rachel Keskinen: He is a horse with nine lives and he has used a couple of those up already. A few years ago, he severed a tendon kicking out at a fence in his field and we almost lost him due to infection. It was touch and go for a few weeks...thankfully our vets were absolutely wonderful and Request made a remarkable recovery. Three months later he was back in work and in January 2009 he stepped out at his first show. In August 2010 we almost lost him again, this time to colic. He went completely downhill in the space of a few minutes. It was very lucky that we were there when it happened, and without the help of our wonderful neighbour, Karen Fisher, he would not be with us today. We have had great success in the ring but it hasn't been without its ups and downs.

SHOWCIRCUIT: What are your plans now? What will you be up to over the coming months?

Rachel Keskinen: We have some big shows coming up over the next couple of months, including the RT Edgar Equestrian Victoria Show Horse State Titles in March and the Grand National Show Horse Championships in Sydney and the Sydney Royal Show, both in April. Request is going beautifully at the moment, so my aim is to continue to enjoy showing him and reaching our goals together.

SHOWCIRCUIT: Do you have any tips for up and coming show riders? What do you think are the main secrets to your success?

Rachel Keskinen: We are very careful with his care, feed and exercise regime (trying not to over work him). We monitor Request constantly, checking his health and soundness and make changes often on a weekly basis. I feel breaks are important for the horse's well being, so Request is also turned out completely twice a year; two months over winter and 4-5 weeks in summer. It keeps him fresh for when he comes back into work. You can't expect them to perform if they're not allowed the odd holiday as well. He does right by me so I will do right by him.

Success doesn't come overnight even with a lovely horse like Request. It takes a lot of hard work and dedication on a daily basis. Learning never stops with horses. Fortunately I have a lot of helpful and knowledgeable people around me. I ride the horse, but I have an incredibly amazing mum, who puts in the hours with me, a most supportive family, and some fabulous mentors. To reach the top, isn't about winning, it's about achieving your own goals. Request has shown me that with determination, those goals can not only be reached, they can be blown out of the water. Thank you Request.