

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL AUSTIN...

Australian show rider, handler, judge, producer, instructor...



Paul Austin - DICAVALLI ROYAL GIANNI

Jennifer Boyes speaks to Brisbane-based Paul Austin who has worn many hats throughout his career. For years, his name has been synonymous with the highest echelons of showing and he is well known throughout Australasia for his vast knowledge of the sport and his meticulous attention to detail. Paul took some time out this month to share his latest news, top showing tips and how he thinks the New Zealand show scene could be improved.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *How long have you been involved in showing? What convinced you to become a professional producer and rider/handler?*

Paul Austin: I have been showing at the top levels for 24 years now. Professional producing and riding is something I fell into really. I've always been something of a perfectionist and enjoy all the puffing and fluffing that comes with creating a winning show horse. I love turning a beast into a beauty. Over time, people started noticing that my animals were always well schooled and smartly turned out. Word soon spread and I now have a fair number of client horses on the yard at any one time. At the moment, we have 14 on the go.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *What result have you been most proud of?*

Paul Austin: I think my proudest moment was at the 2002 Royal Melbourne Show. Three girls that I was teaching were entered in three different rider classes and they all came top of their line-up. One of them went on to win the overall championship, a feat made even more amazing by the fact that she had a broken arm and had to cover up the cast with her jacket!

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *Are there any titles left? Is there anything else you would like to win?*

Paul Austin: I have just sold a lovely Arabian Warmblood hack called LA Chicago, and I would love to see him win at the EA Show Horse Nationals this year with his new rider, Tess Hughes. She is only young but I knew that they would suit each other perfectly, and they have quickly formed a superb partnership. In fact, at age 16, she recently became the youngest rider in living memory at any Royal to claim the Hack Championship, when she took out the 2010 Adelaide title.

I love seeing other people win. It's a real buzz when you win a class yourself but the thrill is just as great when you get a phone call to tell you that a horse/rider combination that you brought together is taking out the big prizes.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *Do you have any up and coming stars at the moment?*

Paul Austin: I'm pretty excited about the small hack True Religion. He has been to three big shows and won at each of them, which is a great start.

The six-year-old show hunter hack DicaValli Royal Gianni, is also doing exceptionally well and has already won two state titles. He has since been sold to a 13-year-old girl. I will be producing him until Werribee, after which he will go to his new home. He is an outstanding horse, and I am lucky enough to have his half brother waiting in the wings.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *As well as being a successful producer and exhibitor, you are also in demand as an instructor. How did that develop?*

Paul Austin: When I first started out, I paid for agistment at a local riding school. One day, they came to me and asked if I would like to pay my way by taking lessons. Once I started taking on students, I just got busier and busier and it grew from there. I'm a good communicator and find it easy to relate to people, which is probably one of the reasons people enjoy learning with me. Now I instruct a whole range of different riders from beginners just starting out to people competing at the highest levels. They aren't just show riders either. I have pony club riders, dressage competitors, eventers, and Riding for the Disabled members on my books.

I have been making regular trips to New Zealand for about a year now, where I mainly teach show and dressage riders. It's full on and I sometimes get through 12-14 lessons a day, but I love coming out and seeing the progress that people are making.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *Are there any common riding mistakes that you see people making in the ring?*

Paul Austin: One thing you see quite often is people who normally ride perfectly well falling apart in the ring. They let their nerves get to them and forget everything! My advice is to relax and have a drink from the chilly bin before your class... I always treat the shows as a social occasion as well as a competition. It keeps you much more relaxed and reminds you that showing is a sport to be enjoyed, no matter how determined you are to walk away with the ribbons and the glory!

Once you're in the ring, keep the picture that you want to achieve in your mind. Remind yourself of the position you need to be in and how the horse should be going, all the way through the class, and correct when necessary. If you feel you are not riding as well as you would like, go away after the event and do your homework with an eagle-eyed instructor.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *From the photos of you and the riders you mentor, it is clear that your turnout is much more subtle than some of the other riders and handlers. Do you think things have become a little too 'bling' in NZ and Australia?*

Paul Austin: At the end of the day, when all the bling and sparkle is taken away, we're judging the horse or pony underneath. Too much make-up and bling definitely detracts from the beauty of the horse and really annoys me as a judge.

Whether I'm riding or leading, I like to stick with an outfit that is basic but modern. You certainly don't want to look tacky or like you're trying to impersonate a Christmas tree. Some of the lead rein outfits, in particular, can get so over the top with the big red hats and blue stockings. They look like they're going to the races, not entering a show class!

Remember, the main focus should be on the horse - less is more.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *Do you think showing is as popular as it used to be?*

Paul Austin: Sadly, due to the expense and the rising cost of land over the years, we have lost people from the show ring. At the moment, we are still struggling with the aftermath of a recession and that has undoubtedly taken its toll on entries as well. Showing is not as strong as it was ten years ago.

There are things that can be done to revive the sport... Firstly, it is vital that people give back to the sport, whether it's through judging, stewarding or sponsoring a class. Shows are always in short supply of those three elements but without new sponsors and new judges, our sport will fall over.

We also need to appreciate our young competitors as they are the future of the discipline. I was recently contacted by the mother of a girl who had won one of the classes I had sponsored. Her little girl was absolutely stoked. It's these young riders that will keep the sport honest and alive. We need to recognise that and foster up and coming talent.

Finally, it's important that those more experienced riders encourage and are friendly towards those just starting out. Some people keep their secrets and knowledge close to their chest but I don't think that's helpful for the sport at all. If someone asks me for some help at a show, I will always give it, whether it's to do with the size of the plaits or a clothing issue. It's not a conflict of interest. Even if it's someone in the same class as me, I will do what I can. The best horse will win on the day.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *Is there anything you would change to improve show ring standards in New Zealand?*

Paul Austin: I have a lot of respect for the New Zealand show riders and handlers. They do a great job and the country is breeding some excellent riding ponies in particular. I also take my hat off to the combinations that come over to Werribee in December to compete in the Trans-Tasman competition. I'm always impressed with the standards and the passion that the riders and owners must have to make that trip.

One thing I would love to see is more showing seminars in New Zealand, particularly around the presentation of the horse. If some of the larger showing yards in New Zealand took on the responsibility of teaching people how best to turn out both themselves and their mounts, it would only be beneficial for the show scene as a whole.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: *Finally, do you have any top show ring tips for us?*

Paul Austin: Equine ear plugs are a fantastic invention if you are competing at somewhere with a bit of atmosphere, such as Horse of the Year or Werribee. Other than that, be fastidious, pay attention to the fine details and make sure you and the horse are as clean and well prepared as can be. For that final finishing touch, I like to use the De Luxe Coat Gloss, Spray & Shine and highlighters from Supreme Products. It really makes them gleam, especially on a sunny day. Those last efforts can make such a difference and give you that vital winning edge.

Too many people take horses to a show that are three months off the track, when they can't possibly be ready. If your horse isn't striking off on the correct leg at home, it certainly isn't going to do it a competition. Don't take your horse out if you're not 100% happy with how it looks or is going. Remember: Professionalism is the key to success.