The Lady's a Legend!

Words: Joan Gilchrist

If equestrian sport had an award for "good sorts", Shirley Watts would surely be a front runner. About the only things the doyenne of Auckland-Manukau Dressage Group hasn't done with horses in her considerable lifetime are rodeo and eventing, and at an age when many would be resting quietly on their laurels, Shirley is still riding, competing, judging and putting back in to her sport in a variety of ways.

As a child in Waterview, Auckland, Shirley "would have given anything to ride a horse." She used to stand outside her home and watch racehorses going past to Avondale and loved visiting relations with farms who had horses. At 13 she got her first horse –"a crazy ex-racehorse".

She started what was to be a lifetime's involvement in the show ring at 14 at the Auckland show "in home-made pants."

Married young, starting a family (she has three daughters) and moving to Pukekohe when the youngest, Anne, was a year old, she became involved at Mangere pony club and in time was given a retired trotter. Then she bought a "nice chestnut mare" and did some shows, before starting hunting with the Waitemata in 1956, moving to the Pakuranga Hunt in 1961.

"I hunted for 35 years and only gave it up because I started training jumpers, and it was too much like hard work to do jumpers and hunt. It started with friend, Nan Henry, who pleaded with Shirley to take her horse, Phineas. I rode him at the hunt point-to-point and thought it was quite interesting."

Ready to go for the Grand National, Phineas did a tendon and that ended that ambition. By then Shirley was hooked on the jumping game and eventually trained five horses, all of which won for her – many of their races under the late Denis Gray – of which probably the most memorable was 1989 McGregor Grant Steeplechase winner, Seeyoulater, who had a remarkably consistent record.

It was while she was training Phineas that Shirley and her daughter, Ann, discovered dressage when they went to watch a Christian Thiess clinic. Her first dressage ride was the Medium horse, Centurion.

"It didn't take me long to realise that, despite all I was doing and how long I had been riding, that I couldn't actually ride! I had to learn all over again and it was so different. I now find dressage the most interesting of the lot."

Over the years in the round-the-ring jumping arena, Shirley will be remembered for a series of good horses, of which the best was probably Beau Monde, but Centurion also won champion hack classes, Foxheath raced, won hack classes, was a top round-the-ring performer (under Gray and daughter Ann) and did dressage. There were two good show jumpers in Major and Fair Exchange – and the memory returns of jumping off against the clock against Ross McVicar over fences up to six feet, and being beaten by one second!

"The challenge of dressage really attracted me," says Shirley and it obviously still does, as she works at Level 5 on her big grey Craighaven Allanon, which has also won saddle hunter classes. The pair is always immaculate and stylish. 'Denim' is the latest of several dressage horses, including Master of Music which she took through from Preliminary level to Open Medium.

"I don't have any trouble memorising my tests…but I'm terrible with names!" she laughs. Apart from "a bung knee" she's pretty fit, which she puts down to her riding and working in her large Onewhero garden, part of a 60-acre property of which 50 acres are leased out to potato growers.

Living there involves a huge mileage as Shirley attends meetings of all the committees on which she serves: Auckland Manukau Dressage, the Royal Easter Show ("that's nearly a full-time job on its own!"), Clevedon A&P, and the committee representing all the user groups at the expanded Clevedon showgrounds.

"Basically, going to committee meetings is my hobby – and there was a time when I would no more have gone on a committee than jump over the moon! I love my riding and it would be very easy to just do that."

She joined the dressage group in 1988, under then president Kathinka de Monchy and, eventually, took on the role herself for 15 years.

"I thought it didn't look good to keep the same person in the job for ever, but I still do just as much!"

If there's a Shirley Watts legacy – apart from her daughters, two grand children and two great-grandchildren – it will be in the Clevedon facility. She and Adrienne Murdoch planned the dressage area and designed the clubhouse – then went out and raised the money to bring their plans to fruition, working with the then Manukau City Council and the other user groups (pony club, A&P society, the dressage group and the harness club).

The dressage committee gave the pair carte blanche, and it delighted the council and the companies involved in the makeover to be dealing with just two people who could make decisions without rushing back to consult a committee.

The dressage area now offers eight all-weather arenas and truck parking, centred around a thoroughly practical clubhouse facility with office, kitchen and toilet facilities and enough space to utilise for social events and meetings, eliminating the need for expensive hired marquees for the championships.

"The plan for a covered arena is done. We realise that we would have difficulty raising the $1.5 million with such a small group…but we still have the plan and the area, and we aim eventually to put it up…whether or not Adrienne and I will be around to see it, who knows?"

This is one special lady whose philosophy for a long life speaks volumes.

"I am 100% positive that keeping busy, doing things and having something to aim for is the way to keep young." How young? Not for publication, but you can safely bet that family and friends are winding up for a special birthday occasion next year!

"Shirley? She's a legend… she's the hardest working member of our committee; she puts in so many hours.

"The committee just waits for her to say, 'We've got another $30,000!'"