

# Mark Todd!

## TRAINING THE NEXT GENERATION OF NEW ZEALAND EVENT RIDERS!

WORDS: JENNIFER BOYES PHOTOS: LIBBY LAW PHOTOGRAPHY

It's not every day that the opportunity to train with one of the worlds most experienced and successful Olympic three day event riders comes along. Thus it is no surprise that so many people jumped at the chance when Mark Todd returned home to hold a show jumping clinic at Abderry Equine Services in Karaka, Auckland, in December. One passionate young teen even sold her entire beloved Shleich pony collection through TradeMe to pay her way, so determined was she to attend the two day course with her idol.

The clinic was organised by Cheski Brown, principal of Abderry, and event secretary Jan Sanders, who recognised the value many of our up and coming New Zealand event riders could gain from a few hours with the multiple gold medal winner. Five sessions were held each day: two 80cm-1m training classes, a 90cm-1.05m class for teenagers, a 1m-1.10m class and a class for 10 and 11 year old riders.

One of the first things that becomes apparent when spending time with Mark is that flatwork is king. If any rider thinks a lesson with him will involve a couple of hours' hooning around 1.20m fences, they have another think coming! The students in all of his sessions, no matter what height they are jumping at home, spend a substantial chunk of their time focusing on flatwork and developing a good rhythm and balance. Lots and lots of simple walk-trot-walk transitions are the order of the day, with Mark emphasising the importance of incorporating them into every schooling session.

'Before you even go near a jump, it is important to spend time getting the horse to listen, with half-halts and plenty of transitions,' explains Mark. 'Those transitions should be repeated until the horse



is listening without arguing. The horse will then start to relax, soften through the neck and soften in the contact. Also, remember you need actually to make a difference with each transition. They won't learn anything if the speed and stride don't change.'

'Before you can jump even a metre, you should be able to slow down and stop quickly,' adds Mark. 'These are real basics. It doesn't matter if it looks a little unrefined at first. Make sure you mean it when you ask the horse to move up or down a gear. If he is lazy, put the leg on or give him a quick, sharp smack next to the leg to reinforce the aid if he doesn't listen. It's not being rough; it's giving them instructions that they understand and telling them in no uncertain terms what you want from them. We're looking for obedience. It is absolutely imperative that you have your horse listening to you when you're out there competing over a course of jumps. If you don't have compliance at home when schooling, it will undoubtedly all fall to pieces at an event.'

For obvious reasons, canter is the one pace that is of huge importance in the show jumping ring and Mark gives it due attention during his teaching sessions. When the clinic groups move into canter, Mark asks them to carry out an exercise designed to rebalance and refocus the horse. The riders are asked to turn in a small circle to the left, before striding on around the large circle for 6-7 strides and repeating the smaller circle.

'Before executing the small circle, sit up, whoa and rebalance your horse,' Mark instructs. 'Stay on the small circle until the horse is balanced and listening. Control at canter is vital for jumping. You have to be able to change the stride, not have the same stride all the time. Riding those smaller circles helps rebalance and collect the horse.'

Along with the basic transitions, Mark is an avid advocate of pole work, insisting that it should be a part of every horse's daily routine. He thinks ground poles are an invaluable tool that are unfortunately often overlooked, a belief confirmed when several horses approach the poles with eyes on stalks and legs flying in all directions.

'It shouldn't be a big deal for the horse. It should be used to dealing with trotting and cantering poles in every schooling session,' says Mark. 'Poles on the ground can be such a great tool, teaching the horse to use its back, flex the joints and to think for itself. It will also learn to take its time and stay in rhythm although, of course, it is always up to the rider to regulate the pace and place the horse correctly over the poles.'

'Different exercises, such as trotting or cantering a large figure of eight or serpentine over poles, can also really help a horse and rider focus on keeping the correct bend and staying smooth when changing direction. These kinds of basic school movements will do fantastic things for a horse's suppleness and will further encourage the horse to listen to its rider. Balance, one of the most important elements in jumping, will also be improved. As the horse becomes more balanced on the flat, he will become more balanced over fences.'

Once the horses and riders participating in the clinic do move on to some jumping work, over grids and a few short courses, the benefit of all the flatwork becomes blindingly clear. The horses are much looser and more relaxed than they were when they first entered the arena, and the control the riders have over each pace is vastly improved.

The key things Mark focuses on at this point are keeping the upper body still over the fence and maintaining a steady contact with the reins. He also assists a few riders with getting the correct lead after a fence by advising them not to lean over the jump to train the horse to change, but to instigate the change by opening the rein out to the right or left. One of the other things that Mark highlights is the importance of well-fitting tack. He notices a few pieces that don't fit quite as perfectly as they should and reminds riders to check that their

tack isn't throwing the horse and rider off balance.

When schooling over fences, Mark is quick to point out that the transitions are just as relevant now - if not more so than they were on the flat. 'After each jump, don't finish and fall into a heap; ask for a proper transition.'

*'You have to be consistent. You can't expect to do something one way one day, then do something different next time and expect the horse to know what you want. Everything should be the same. If you don't get it right first time, repeat until it until the horse is responding to you in the desired way.'*

After observing Mark in action for a short time, it becomes clear that his ethos is noticeably similar to many of the other riders and trainers in his league. Regardless of the discipline, the key to success lies in getting the basics right. It truly is that simple.

'No matter how long you have been competing and at what level, you should always take time to check that the basics are all in place and well established,' Mark tells Show Circuit. 'It's certainly not a case of instilling those basics and then forgetting about them while you move on to more advanced exercises. Those fundamental principles are what hold everything together and enable you to keep moving forward with your schooling and competition goals.'

'The one thing holding a lot of New Zealand riders back is that they want to jump huge courses straightaway and run before they can walk,' adds Mark. 'At the Abderry clinic, I could have kept putting the line of fences up and getting the riders to jump over them but they would not have learned anything new. I wanted them to use the exercises and knowledge I gave them to go away and improve. It's all about jumping a course competently, not jumping a big fence. What I hope for after the clinics I hold is that they go away and practice...all I do is show them a few things that will help; it's up to them after that.'

*'Mark's advice for riders aiming for a professional career in three day eventing is straightforward.'*

*'His mantra is repeat, repeat, repeat correct - and repeat again.'*

'The only way to get there is to continue training your horses and training yourself. That is the only way to improve,' says Mark. 'It's all down to riding correctly. There are no tricks or a shortcut...horse training has been the same for donkey's years. If you listen, learn and put the hours in, you will get to where you want to be.'

Hayley Pickmer, rider of Meet me at Midnight: 'It was excellent, especially for a young horse just off the track. We learned how to slow down without pulling and about concentrating on the quality of the canter before the jump.'

Georgie Alcock, rider of Ellangowan Spirit: 'The most valuable thing I learned was how to train the horse to pick up the correct leg after a jump. Duncan and I both improved massively.'

Simone Lawrence, rider of Mr Darcy: 'I learned so much, especially when it came to keeping the horse soft. I also discovered he needed heaps more leg than I had previously thought!'