

Clarke Johnstone

WORDS: JENNIFER BOYES



There is no arguing that New Zealand eventer Clarke Johnstone is on a roll right now. The talented 24 year old has achieved some stunning results over the past year including a bronze team medal at WEG 2010 and a win at the Kihikihi World Cup earlier this year. He took a few minutes out of his busy schedule to chat to Show Circuit about his top horse Orient Express, moving to the UK and what it would mean to represent NZ at the Olympics...

SHOW/CIRCUIT: You have had a wonderful season so far. Have there been any standout moments for you?

Clarke Johnstone: I've been lucky to have had some great results over the past 12 months. Winning the FEI eventing World Cup series in Sydney last month felt fantastic. Orient Express and I finished on our dressage score which is no mean feat, especially given how fast and furious the cross country course was. Sydney is very twisty and hilly, not many riders stayed within the time. It was all pretty nerve-wracking. Going into the show jumping we were lying in second place and gave one of the fences a rub. Thankfully, Orient Express came through. He's such a pro. Obviously, getting the chance to compete at the World Equestrian Games in Kentucky last year has to be a standout moment. I'm glad that I could help the team get that bronze medal. Winning the World Cup at Kihikihi was also pretty special. It was a strong field and a big course so we did well to lead after the dressage and finish on that score. Orient Express was fabulous- jumping clear and well within the time. It was only our second start after returning from WEG so I was really pleased with how he performed.

Other highlights included taking out third place at Kihikihi on my young horse Incognito which bumped me up to first place on the World Cup leader board with 77 points. I was also pleased to win the CCI** class at Puhinui at the end of last year with KS Secrets. I'm thrilled with how all of the horses have been running this season.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: You must have been thrilled with that bronze team medal at WEG. Were you happy with your performance?

Clarke Johnstone: Competing at WEG was a real honour and it felt amazing to be on the bronze medal winning team. I didn't get the performance that I wanted personally but it was great to be there and a hugely beneficial learning experience. Unfortunately, Orient Express was tired and we had a stop during the cross country. We did the best that we could but sometimes these things are out of your hands. It was certainly not a complete disaster as we both learned so much.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: We hear you're heading over to the UK soon. When is that happening?

Clarke Johnstone: We will be flying to the UK on the 25th May and basing ourselves at British event rider, Pixie Thomas's yard. The horses will have had a busy season so when we arrive they will have ten days off. After that we will bring them in and get cracking with the European competition circuit. It's a very exciting time, I can't wait.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Which horses are you taking to Europe with you? When is your first competition?

Clarke Johnstone: Five horses will be coming with me: Orient Express, Regal Romar, KS Secrets, Incognito and Viper SL. Our first competition is the 3-star event at Aachen, Germany in July. I'm also hoping to compete at Burghley in September.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Are you aiming for Olympic selection? What will it take to qualify?

Clarke Johnstone: It would be a unique experience and such an achievement to ride for New Zealand. The selection criteria hasn't been released yet but it doesn't look like they will require 4-star form. They will definitely be looking for success at 3-star level and very good dressage scores. The selectors will also want really good jumpers as we will have to complete two rounds at the Olympics.

There are five of us on the Olympic 2012 squad: myself, Andrew Nicholson, Mark Todd, Caroline Powell and Jonathan Paget. I will also be aiming to get onto the 2014 team.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Will you be training with anyone in the UK?

Clarke Johnstone: I'm planning on playing it by ear...I will be leaving my dressage trainer Vanessa Way and jumping instructor Vaughn Jeffries behind so will have to make new contacts when I get to the UK. I'm sure that team coach Erik Duvander will be able to help me out.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Ex show horse Regal Romar is one of your event prospects. Are you pleased with his progress so far?



Clarke Johnstone: Ronnie has come up through the ranks incredibly quickly. He had his first start at Kihikihi last year and then this year took out the Open-Intermediate. So he has come a long way in a short time. He was a talented race horse before his successful showing career, he's a real athlete and I'm looking forward to seeing how far we can go together.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Do you have any sponsors at the moment?

Clarke Johnstone: I'm very lucky to have Prestige Equestrian, Mitavite and Hamilton Feeds on board. They have supported me every step of the day...I'm hoping to continue progressing and doing them proud.

SHOW/CIRCUIT: Tell us a little bit about your stable star, Orient Express. Where did you find him?

Clarke Johnstone: Orient Express- stable name Blue- is a 12 year old full thoroughbred by Blues Traveller who was raced eight times before Paul O'Brien purchased him off the track. Paul competed in some training trials for six months before I snapped him up. He has come along in leaps and bounds and has pulled off some really impressive results.

He's got buckets of talent- he's a lovely mover, with the nature, jump and brilliant gallop to match. He's just an excellent all rounder and nice looking on top of that which always helps! He has always been a bit of a star.

Johnstone, You Beauty!

Clarke Johnstone has racked up yet another win, once again proving to the world that he is a force to be reckoned with. The 24 year old Kiwi WEG team bronze medallist kept his nerve to secure a fabulous victory in the Australian round of the FEI eventing World Cup series in Sydney last month.

Clarke and his 12 year old bay thoroughbred gelding Orient Express barely put a foot wrong, finishing on their dressage score of 45.4 penalties. They were one of few combinations to stay within the cross country time and confirmed their win with a faultless showjumping round to finish the three day event.

Despite an impressive performance across country, the pressure was on Clarke and Orient Express going into the showjumping. The pair were sitting in second place, with Shane Rose aboard Taurus heading the field. However, Shane took the first fence and then another, throwing Clarke into serious contention.

'It was all pretty nerve-wracking,' said Clarke. 'We had given one jump a little rub and because I was so nervous it probably wasn't my most stylish jump ever!'

After the event, Clarke expressed how proud he was of his ex-racehorse turned top eventer.

'In the dressage I missed one change but Blue (Orient Express) went really well, and then on the cross country he was just fantastic. It was fast and furious to get inside the time allowed - Sydney is very hilly and twisty.

'We rode it last year and almost made the time so we knew what we had to do,' added Clarke.

Defending champion Christopher Burton, who finished second to Johnstone in the last World Cup round in New Zealand, and his ride Holstein Park Leilani had to settle for reserve once again.

The win gives Johnstone an even greater lead in the World Cup series, after clinching top spot in the Kihikihi round last month. The series ends in France in August and with only three results to count, Johnstone says he's pretty happy with where he is sitting.

Clarke has now relocated to the UK where he will continue his bid for the London Olympics. His next competition will be the 3-star event at Aachen, Germany in July.

Results:

CIC3* FEI World Cup Eventing: Clarke Johnstone (NZ) Orient Express 1, Christopher Burton (Aus) Holstein Park Leilani 2, Shane Rose (Aus) Taurus 3, Stuart Tinney (Aus) Vettori 4... Alice Montgomery (Christchurch) Gordon 15, Laura Wallace (Auckland) Sugoi 17.