

THE SMELL OF GREASEPAINT AND THE ROAR OF THE CROWD!

WORDS: ©ANNA SHARPLEY

SLM MIND GAMES & Francesca Christie claimed the 2009 Sydney Royal COL AV Pope Cup for horses showing thoroughbred qualities. The 2008 EFA National Large Hack of the Year went on to be declared Champion Hack and be awarded the Mackay Memorial Perpetual Trophy that year.



Photo: ©Julie Wilson

With a list of successful horses like SLM Mindgames, SLM Mercedes, SLM Manifique, SLM Signature, SLM Hotshot, SLM Icon, SLM High Profile, SLM Thrill, SLM LA, Elmdale Park Poise, Dashing, Flirting, Finest, EP Cosmopolitan, Honours and Paradiddle who could argue that Stephen Merry has an eye for show horses.

At Canberra Royal in 2007, Stephen exhibited two show horses and was directly responsible for four of the eight hacks in the Championship line up. It is not as if he is the only one out there looking for horses and he has been looking for many years, but in the last decade, his collaboration with Francesca Christie and more recently her daughter Courtney, Stephen has become not only a finder of beautiful show hacks, but a producer as well.

He does not fit the classic weathered horseman mould. Tall, elegant, with silent movie star good looks, Stephen is involved in the entertainment industry and is probably better known by his cabaret stage name, Paris. There is a direct correlation to between the theatricality of his cabaret performance and the presentation of beautiful horses. Both activities are about beauty and movement and as Stephen says, "its all show business" so it is very much a case of "life in the fast lane" for Stephen Merry.

"I'm a city boy really living first on the Gold Coast and then my parents came to Melbourne. We were not a horsey family, but my parents were great race goers. As kids we were taken all over the country to race meetings and I would always be hanging over the mounting yard railings rather than playing with the other kids. I always enjoyed the races and to me it is still a great social day out. I went to Oaklands Pony Club and my first horse was a 16.3hh Thoroughbred off the track called Londoner. I was 12 and really did not know much, but it all seemed to sort itself out. I joined the Oaklands Hunt Club and that was a passion for a while and I was a member of a winning Trios Team at Melbourne Royal. I loved all the pageantry of the hunting and riding Thoroughbreds and have really not strayed too far from them. I was always interested in showing and in the early days had a handy little mare called Swaney that I bought from the late Lyn Halliwell. I used to jump her and then take her into the hack ring



Sarch O'Connor - SLM MERCEDES, EV State Titles 2010. Photo: © Julie Wilson



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at local shows. I just started showing and playing around and I met Sheila Flanders who became a great friend and mentor. Her father had ponies at Rutherglen and we would go up there and show them. We had great fun and I learnt a lot from her and she really got me interested in showing. I learnt so much from Malcolm Ansell too. He has a great eye for a horse and I learnt a great deal just driving all over the countryside with him looking at horses. The razzle dazzle of the show world is wonderfully appealing and the ability to create that final picture in the ring is quite lovely. Whether you are riding it yourself, found it, or had a hand in its presentation and conditioning, its great to be able to sit back and say I helped to create that image."

"I spent a lot of time travelling looking for horses and go to several race meetings a week, either in the car or on a plane. One thing will lead to another; I might be out the back of Bourke at the racetrack looking at a horse and a track rider might come up and say 'do you like that horse mate? A friend of mine had one like that but better here last week'. And on it goes, 'where's that horse now', I ask, 'oh he's gone to Lightening Ridge', so off I go to Lightening Ridge. A two-day trip can turn into a seven-day trip, you just have to keep going and going. You get a feel for people and of course there are trainers you get to know and they know what I am looking for and that is an extreme type, but I might see two a year. The phone doesn't stop ringing with people saying they have a horse for me and the first thing I ask is 'what is its head like'? I look at the head first and then the length of rein and the way the neck comes up out of the shoulder. I am looking for a beautiful type and a well-conformed horse. You can have all that, but it's not until you get them home and give them a chance that you know whether they will have the brain to stand up to showing, which is pretty intense. I can live with some small conformation faults as long as they can get up and go, I mean, show me the perfect horse with an x-factor! Nowadays to be a top class hack they have to be more than just beautiful horses standing, they have to be able to move. For me it does not have to be

big movement but they do have to have the ability to get up and go. Movement is the biggest change in hacking in the last decade. The days of having them beautiful, big, fat and shiny and mincing around the ring are gone. Now they have to be beautiful and take a stride. Their conditioning too has changed, with the look now a healthy, more athletic looking horse that is well topped up."

"I love the process of finding horses, but the cost of buying them has escalated over the years and as most of mine are for sale its important that they will stand up to it. So I don't want to buy, seven, eight or nine year olds that have had 88 starts, I am looking for three, four and five year olds that have been lightly raced and are not institutionalized racehorses and don't have any soundness issues. I get them vetted, as when you are paying a lot of money I think you have to, although very often after I have bought them as it is not practical to do so beforehand. You have to be a good judge of conformation and soundness, as often you have to buy them there and then on the spot. You just have to buy them when you see them and sometimes I won't leave the racecourse without the horse. It takes a lot of negotiation. One fellow had a horse I wanted and he would not sell it, as he wanted to win the Dubbo Cup. 'What's the Dubbo Cup worth' I asked and handled the purchase that way. I



Stephen Merry - SLM Thrill. Photo: © Julie Wilson

always get them vetted, as I want to know exactly what I am dealing with and if there are any management concerns. Some things I will accept, as I know with proper management they will not be an issue. Hacks are worked hard so they have to be able to stand up to the work. There are some failures of course, and some horses, as beautiful as they are do not make the grade, which is heartbreaking. I am always on the lookout for certain horses for certain people and you have to try and match them. I like to place the horse knowing that the best will be done by and for them and I certainly don't mind being beaten by a horse I have sold, its good for the game and its good for business. I really enjoy seeing my horses go on with other people."

"In the early days I would just buy them and then move them on and showing a horse was not a priority. Francesca (Vale) Christie moving down to Melbourne years ago was a turning point for me. I had known her before that and my association with her and Michael Christie was a big turning point for me. With the Christies I got more into producing and showing the horses I had bought. The horses stay with Francesca, which is great as she is there seven days a week and gives them the attention and work the competition horses need. With my other commitments I was not able to do that. So we are hanging

on to them longer and getting them in the ring and having some fun with them. When they arrive at the stable they need a lot of work before they can show. It is a big change for these horses, most of which are off the track and Francesca is great at that. Nothing does a horse off the track more good than a run of shows on the Wimmera or the May run. Fronting up day after day after day really does help the penny drop and they realise they are not at the races. It's the constant repetition and constant work, but it takes time and a run of shows is good for that. To become show hacks many horses need to be shaped up, some just have it, but many need the right work to get the right shape. The biggest issue is the well developed under neck muscle that many racehorses have. It's a matter of getting a top line on them and making a beautiful horse even more beautiful. We work them in the right frame, deep and round. For three to six months the horses are worked that way, often with their nose almost touching the ground, which really helps that neck muscle and builds up the top line. A lot of whether a horse makes it or not comes down to its early handling and there are some trainers, who are real horsemen and I would not hesitate to take a horse from them as they have been well handled and are happy. A lot of trouble with a horse's temperament has been man made."

"Getting a green horse off the track is not for everyone. A green horse and a green rider/ trainer is not a good combination. Even with a lot of experience there are always failures. Francesca and I have people asking for horses all the time and we really try and put a suitable combination together so they can be successful and have fun. We have to take into consideration the rider's ability and work commitments etc. They all want the stunning horse, but they are not all suitable. For many riders it is better for them to send the horse to a professional trainer for a few months or have it permanently in training. This is an extra cost, but rather than just having a beautiful horse off the track, they will have a horse that is well on its way to becoming a show hack. And that's what we do, I find them and Francesca trains them, shows them and takes them on the run of shows and they come back with a different frame of mind, but it is hard

work, and unless you have had experience with young thoroughbreds off the track, it is fraught with difficulties, unless you encounter that rare gem that is just ready to go and has worked life out."

"In the ring I like a horse right up in the bridle, with its ears pricked and I love it literally sitting on the edge, it's a heart in your mouth ride, which does not suit everybody. When it works it is breathtaking and exciting and you can hear the roar from the crowd. If it does not work, I'm prepared to accept that and try again at the next show. Not a lot of people are prepared to ride like that, but Francesca is. I am under no illusion as to my riding ability and I get more pleasure sitting in the grandstand watching them than I do riding them. Although at Canberra in 2007, I really did want to win Best Novice with SLM Thrill. I had not ridden in the ring for quite some time and it was very, very exciting. I didn't think I could beat Roy Davies as his horses always look so well and go beautifully. In the end it was Courtney (Christie) who beat me with one of our own, the lovely mare SLM Manufique. SLM Thrill won the Gelding Showing Thoroughbred Qualities and that did cause a bit of a stir as he has Sporthorse blood in him. But it was not a breed class and he is a beautiful horse. There have been a lot of successful horses and some I have liked more than others and although I would have thoroughbreds more than anything else, and there are certain stallions I will always chase up like Dolphin Street and Palace Music etc. At the end of the day I am looking for a beautiful horse and I don't care if it is out of a Clydesdale by a Shetland, as long as it is beautiful.

An example of this, is riding pony thoroughbred cross, Myscal Aloof, which was a very successful show horse here in Australia and now resides in New Zealand. He was out of a thoroughbred mare by pony stallion Westhill Standing Ovation, he has rhythmic movement and swing that I always look for in my show horses, that 'look at me' star quality which is hard to look past. For a large show horse with a pony bloodline he is quite remarkable.

From Stephen's point of view, no matter what you campaign make sure it ticks the right boxes; conformation, star quality and movement.

MYSICAL ALOOF was owned by Kirsty Daniels. Seen here competing at Barastoc in Australia before coming to New Zealand.

