

NEW ZEALAND'S Equestrian Heroes...

Over the years, certain riders and trainers have seemed to attract more admiration, reverence and celebration than any others. They might have a certain, inimitable way with their horses, have a talent for teaching or have achieved outstanding success in competition. We spoke to three competitors about who has inspired them over the years and asked them to give their definition of a true New Zealand equestrian hero.

Most equestrian competitors, whether they are content to attend a couple of shows a year or are aiming for Olympic glory, have been inspired by another rider or mentor at some point in their life. However, a select few come up in conversations time and time again. Some have been out competing on the world stage and have a sideboard sagging under the weight of their trophies and awards. Others toil quietly away as instructors, sailing under the radar for the most part, but still hugely influential.

When up and coming three day eventer, Alice Montgomery, was younger, she was most in awe of the New Zealanders competing successfully on the international circuit.

'When I first started riding, back when I was nine or ten, I really looked up to people such as Blyth Tait and Mark Todd,' explains Alice. 'I even remember doing a Mark Todd diorama for a school project once!'

'Funnily enough, I never felt the same way about the show jumpers and dressage competitors. I was completely taken up with the event riders, even really early on. We had a saddlery down the road that rented out videos of Burghley and Badminton and I used to spend hours glued to the screen, watching these legends thundering around a cross-country track. I guess I was naturally drawn to it.'

As Alice got older and became more involved in event riding herself the people she looked up to and gained motivation from also shifted.

'Nowadays I have a lot of respect for people like my dressage instructor, Penny Castle,' adds Alice. 'The things she can get out of a horse are simply outstanding. She can do things that you would never think could be done. My admiration for other riders is also not restricted to one or two competitors like it was when I was younger. I appreciate the skill of the top dressage riders as much as the mathematical accuracy of our leading cross-country combinations. There is something to learn from each of them.'

Alice has no doubt that this country is still home to a number of riding heroes whom most horse lovers will continue to hold in very high esteem, regardless of their discipline.

'Anyone who has had success overseas, like Katie McVean is at the moment, will achieve admiration as we're a small country,' adds Alice. 'You only have to look at the Katie McVean Equestrian business



Kiwi legends: Blyth Tait (above), and Mark Todd (below).

PHOTO: KIT HOUGHTON - FEI

page on Facebook to see how people, particularly the younger ones, idolise her and are proud of the fact that she's a Kiwi. People who have not only managed to compete on the international stage and have excelled at it are true masters of their sport. They deserve the respect of everyone back home.'

Advanced dressage rider, Alicia Collin, who campaigns the ever improving 'Leo Dreams of Gold,' can clearly recall the individuals she looked up to when she was young.

'When I first started riding I looked up to pretty much anyone who had horses or any remote association to a horse! Then, after spending ten years having spasmodic lessons at riding schools or riding the neighbours' mad ponies and horses, I finally got my first pony when I was 13 years old. Up to that point the horse people I looked up to were the 'heroes' of that day and age, Blyth Tait and Andrew Nicholson to name a couple.

'I became aware of the world's most celebrated dressage riders while watching the 1996 Atlanta Olympic television coverage...we taped it so I could watch it over and over again! I distinctly remember watching footage from the dressage Kür, with Anky riding Bonfire to his especially composed Bonfire Symphony. It was by far the most awe-inspiring thing I had ever seen and convinced me that dressage was for me. After that point I started really looking up to dressage stars and master trainers, from both New Zealand and further afield.'

Like many others, Alicia doesn't have to think for too long when deciding on a particular rider or trainer who has done New Zealand proud.

'If I had to name a Kiwi equestrian legend, the first person who comes to mind would easily be Mark Todd. To be voted by the FEI as The Rider of the 20th Century...well I think that is an incredible

feat. Add to that the fact that he's the only New Zealand rider to have been awarded the Supreme Halberg Award and the only rider to have been inducted into the New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame, along with all the individual and team gold medals and international wins...well what's not legendary about that!'

According to leading endurance rider and WEG 2010 contender, Alison Higgins, her discipline does not produce as many publicly recognisable personalities, but that doesn't mean the sport is not chock full of talented riders.

'Endurance riding is quite an individual sport and isn't as spectator-friendly as dressage and eventing can be. For that reason not so many 'celebrity' riders come out of it,' says Alison.

'However, that doesn't mean there aren't people who have motivated me and helped me lift my own skills. Kevin James has pretty much been my coach up to WEG and is an absolute wealth of knowledge and information. Sarah Hamer is also an extraordinary talent. These individuals work very hard for the sport and can certainly be described as heroes.'

Despite being passionate about endurance riding, two familiar names from the world of three day eventing come to Alison's mind when asked to name a New Zealand horse-riding star.

'Even though I am an endurance rider, I would still name Mark Todd and Blyth Tait as true Kiwi equestrian legends,' says Alison. 'More than that, they are Kiwi icons. Everyone has heard about them and has respect for their achievements, whether they ride or not. In fact, I'm harbouring a secret desire to bump into Mark at WEG! It would be fantastic to meet him in the flesh...'

All the evidence suggests that the New Zealand equestrian hero is still alive and kicking. The old favourites are present and correct, but more intriguing and exciting is the number of new personalities continually emerging. These individuals, whatever area of equestrianism they are from and whether they are trainer or rider, are valuable assets. They serve to encourage, inspire and pass on their skills to the next generation of New Zealand riders and competitors...and for that, we thank them.



PHOTO: KIT HOUGHTON

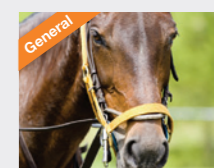
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