

A Star is Born...

The Horse of the Year Rising Star classes have been a popular feature for some years now, but what is their function and what should be expected from an up and coming showing star? Jennifer Boyes gets all the answers from longstanding judge Claude Avent and the winner of the 2010 Rising Star Hack of the Year title class, Michael Morton-Beetham.

The Rising Star classes, held at the Horse of the Year Show, have become increasingly popular since their inception. There is a category for almost every type, including saddle hunters, hacks, park hacks, show ponies and saddle hunter ponies; and in 2010 the newly introduced riding horses also became eligible.

Rising Star classes were originally for horses and ponies that hadn't won a championship in the previous two years. This year the rules changed slightly, with entrants now restricted to two years' competition in the Rising Star section. Rising Star title classes have also been introduced with the qualification being one novice/open conformation championship or two reserve novice/open conformation championships.

Experienced Auckland based judge Claude Avent oversaw a number of Rising Star classes this year. Claude, who has 40 years' judging experience behind him, is pleased that a qualification has been introduced, believing it will improve overall standards and take the Rising Star section forward.

'I think it is very important to have a qualification in place,' says Claude. 'One of the problems with not asking riders to qualify is that all sorts of horses and ponies are entered, regardless of whether they are the right type or not, simply because the owner wants to compete at Horse of the Year. As a result, the Rising Star classes get far too big, run overtime and we have to split them.'

'Introducing a qualifying system will also mean that overall standards are raised. If a horse or pony has to win a championship or two reserve championships before competing in the Rising Star title classes then it is much more likely that you will end up with the correct type of animal in each category and they will be definite show quality. This can only be good for the future of showing and for the future of the Rising Star classes at Horse of the Year.'

Although all Horse of the Year entrants must be true show animals, encompassing the type, quality, movement and presence

that sets them apart from other horses and ponies, Claude emphasises that there are some key differences between the open and Rising Star classes.

'The Rising Star showing classes are primarily conformation classes, so that is what I'm looking at first,' explains Claude. 'As far as manners and way of going is concerned, I'm a bit more lenient in these classes. I don't mind if they have some little problems in their workout or on the circle as they are novice animals. You can't expect the same level of schooling as you would from an open show pony or hack.'

'We ask them to perform a simple, easy workout, just to show that they are capable of working on both reins and can stay balanced. I can forgive some breaking in canter and trot as long as it's not for too long. The main thing is that they move well, are correctly put together and show potential for future success once they have progressed and matured.'

Although seasoned horseman Michael Morton-Beetham has been training horses for 12 years, he first tried his hand at showing only three years ago. This year, he rode the 172.5cm, five-year-old thoroughbred Quidditch to victory in the Rising Star Hack of the Year class, beating off some tough competition.

'It was great to win the title, especially as I only took him on in April 2009,' smiles Michael. 'I knew we had a good shot but you never know what the judges are thinking, especially at Horse of the Year when a few of them are contributing towards the final mark. It was very good competition as well, with six or seven top notch animals in our class. Every year there are some really nice horses coming through.'

Michael is a great fan of the Rising Star classes, seeing them as especially useful for young horses which, although displaying great quality and promise, aren't quite ready for the open ring at Horse of the Year.

'The Rising Star section is a great addition to the schedule as it means the younger and more novice horses aren't thrown in at the deep end with the older animals,' says Michael. 'There is noticeably less hype and noise in the Rising Star ring which means the horses can be eased into the atmosphere. The main arena at Horse of the Year can be a bit too much the first time you take a horse down for the competition.'

'The entrants are also expected to do a much less challenging workout, which is ideal for a horse or pony that is still learning the ropes,' adds Michael. 'The hardest thing that was asked of us was a three-loop serpentine, with changes through walk and trot.'

Michael has competed in a number of Rising Star classes now, in both the hack and saddle hunter ring, and has developed a firm understanding of what the judges are looking for in a future show ring star.

'The most important thing is that they move well and are nice and straight,' says Michael. 'Correct conformation, a good brain, and that critical show ring presence is also important. They do have to be well schooled and have manners, even though not as much is expected of them as the more experienced horses. You can't just drag something out of the field and expect to do well.'

'It's a hugely valuable class and one that should certainly not be overlooked when bringing on a prospective show horse or show pony,' adds Michael. 'It's a great way of getting a young or novice animal used to the buzzy atmosphere of a very large show without asking too much of them. That is why so many knowledgeable show people use the section when they take a novice horse or pony down to Hastings for the first time. It is also why the Rising Star ring is still one of the best places to go if you want to spot a showing star of the future. Who knows? The winner of this year's Rising Star show pony, park hack or saddle hunter class could one day be taking out a Horse of the Year title in the open ring.? They certainly have the potential to go to all the way to the top.'

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