



INTERVIEW WITH SHOW PONY BREEDER AND PRODUCER ALAN WINDLE

WORDS: JENNIFER BOYES PHOTOS: MENDIP FARM PHOTOGRAPHY

Interview with Show Pony Breeder and Producer Alan Windle Show Circuit: When did you first start showing in-hand?

Alan Windle: It must have been about twenty years ago. I did a stint in the UK, working at a couple of show yards and picked up a lot of tips. I loved competing over there - we went all over the country and I was very privileged to see many of the ancestors of my current ponies in the flesh.

I then came back to New Zealand and founded Nala Stud, before producing under-saddle ponies for a number of years. Because of the time factor, I had to eventually choose between showing in-hand and under-saddle. I decided to go with the in-hand and have been focusing on those classes ever since.

SC: How does it feel to have won the coveted In Hand Pony of the Year title at the Horse of the Year Show six times, including five years in a row?

AW: Being placed at the top of the line at the most recent Horse of the Year Show, by both New Zealand and international judges, has to be one of the highlights of my career. This kind of recognition is something all breeders strive for. It is affirmation that we are on the right track. What makes it even better is that all of my ponies were in the top three - Nala Emblem's Zephyr, Nala Nicholai's Fern and Nala Emblem's Nicholette - with very few points between them. I'm so proud of the fact that they're all home-bred. I have taken them from

foals through to maturity so they are a genuine New Zealand made product. It's great to know that imported judges rate our ponies as well. It means we are breeding true international quality stock.

Another amazing thing about the class this year was that, apparently, it was the first time that the class had seen a trifecta by one breeder. It was an unbelievable day all round.

SC: What did you think of the rest of the competition?

AW: The competition was very strong which is only natural as the best ponies from Southland to North of Auckland were competing. The Horse of the Year Show is the pinnacle of the season, giving you the opportunity to go up against the cream of the crop. It is a showcase of the best.

SC: You have also taken out the Best Presented In Hand Pony at the Horse of the Year Show for the last five years. Why do you think you are so well known for your turnout?

AW: I'm successful in the presentation classes because I'm an absolute stickler for detail. All three of my ponies were turned out to exactly the same standard at Horse of the Year but I could only take one into the turnout class. I take no shortcuts and I put an awful lot of effort into the details. A lot of it is to do with the time that is put in behind the scenes - the feeding, the conditioning and the training. A huge amount of work and effort is put in at home. I wouldn't dream of taking a pony out that hadn't had at least a month's worth of work put into it.

I also pay attention to what I wear as the handler's turnout can really affect the overall picture. I like to look a little different but I'm not into anything flashy. I prefer a classic, tailored appearance.

SC: Are there any other wins that you're particularly proud of?

AW: I'm extremely proud of the fact that, as well as achieving great things at the Horse of the Year Show, I have also won the Supreme In-Hand Pony award at the NZ Nationals ten times. You know you must be doing something right when you keep pulling off results like that!

SC: Where did you learn all that you know about presentation?

AW: I started off at the bottom just like everybody else and watched how the best people did it. To be honest, nothing much has changed since my earlier days. I still turn out the same as I did on day one. I'm not into fads.

SC: What is your pet hate when it comes to turnout?

AW: The thing I dislike the most is garishly dressed handlers and make-up dripping off ponies. There is a reason I don't wear light coloured suits when I'm judging anymore... I also don't like gigantic, over the top browbands. Why would you cover up a lovely little head with a huge chunk of velvet and diamante?

There is nothing wrong with a traditional, natural look. I think people lose sight of this sometimes and get a little carried away with all the glitz and make-up.

Handlers also need to remember that the judge is assessing the horse, not the handler. Big hats, over the top skirts and heels are not

practical and if the wind gets up, the judge will be looking at you for completely the wrong reason as you struggle to keep your hat on with one hand and your skirt down with the other!

There is also the myth that in order to be successful you must spend thousands of dollars on equipment. This is simply not true. I still use the same bridles that I originally brought out with me from the UK. They still look beautiful because they have been well cared for. Classic never dates.

SC: Your youngsters are always so well behaved at shows. What is your secret?

AW: Again, it's to do with how much work you put in before the show. We trial lots of different things at home, which includes working them in all conditions so they are used to dealing with rain and wind blowing up behind them. We walk them under our washing line and around the clothes and under the trees, desensitising them as much as possible.



Nala Emblem's Zephyr

It's possible for anyone to prepare their youngsters like this. It's no big secret and if you're passionate about showing, you will find the time to get it done. Contrary to popular belief, I don't hang around all day and play ponies. I run a busy business and if I finish late at work, I have to come home and work them under lights.

Even though it can be a lot of hard work, the results of all your efforts are clear when you take them out to compete. The Horse of the Year Show was only the second outing for Nala Emblem's Nicholette, yet she never faltered and she ended up winning her two year old class and placing third in the title class. It was only the fourth outing for the runner-up colt, Nala Nicholai's Fern and he was just a yearling. In the end, all the time and energy you have spent in the run-up to the show is worth it.

SC: What is the key to doing well in the in-hand classes?

AW: In-hand classes are a real challenge. Your animal must go as nicely as a ridden pony but its entire body is on show. A big part of doing well is related to ringcraft. Showing the pony to its best ability is equally important in both in-hand and ridden.

There are a few things you can do to put yourself at more of an advantage when you enter the ring. First impressions are very important and the minute you enter the ring the judge will be looking for the outstanding animals and getting a feel of the class generally with a view to choosing their first line up. As you enter the ring, make sure that your horse is leading well with the degree of activity that suits it best, that you are level with its shoulder and have a good contact with its head and that your lead rein is held securely and tidily with no trailing ends.

When you trot up for the judge, balance is everything, so you should still be level with the shoulder and able to run fast enough to keep pace with the horse, rather than hanging back and pulling the

horse's head around you, which can make it look as if the horse is throwing the offside foreleg.

It also helps if you are leading a horse with an amiable temperament that you get along with. The stallion Nala Emblem's Zephyr, for example, is an absolute joy to show. He hasn't got a bad bone in his body.

SC: As well as producing many champion ponies yourself, you are also a highly respected judge. What do you enjoy most about judging?

AW: I have judged many times in Australia, across most states. This has included judging at the Brisbane Royal (Ekka) for the past two years. The majority of my weekends are booked up in New Zealand as well so I'm certainly kept busy. One of the competitions I'm most looking forward to judging at is the New Zealand Royal, alongside some British judges that are coming over. I love the travelling, the judging and meeting lots of interesting people.

On top of my judging commitments, I'm also an RAS Judge's Trainer and Judge's Coordinator. I was also President of the New Zealand National Show for eleven years before stepping down just recently. Although, they haven't let me escape entirely as they have now named me Patron to recognise my input. I still consider myself a little too young to be a Patron of anything but I am honoured nonetheless! I've been very lucky and have had a glittering career. I see my judging and involvement as my way of putting something back into the sport and the fact that I was recently named RAS Judge of the Year tells me that my efforts must be making some difference. To be recognised as a judge, as well as a producer and breeder is a great feeling.

SC: What are you aiming for with the Nala Stud breeding programme?

AW: I have always had a very clear idea of what I wanted to breed and this hasn't changed since I first set up Nala Stud. We were one of the first studs to start breeding that finer type of show pony a couple of decades ago. We were ridiculed at first for producing ponies with 'chicken legs' but the type soon became so popular that they split the hunter types and show pony types into separate rings. I am quite proud that we had a positive influence on the show scene and pony breeding, even when we were still a relatively young outfit.

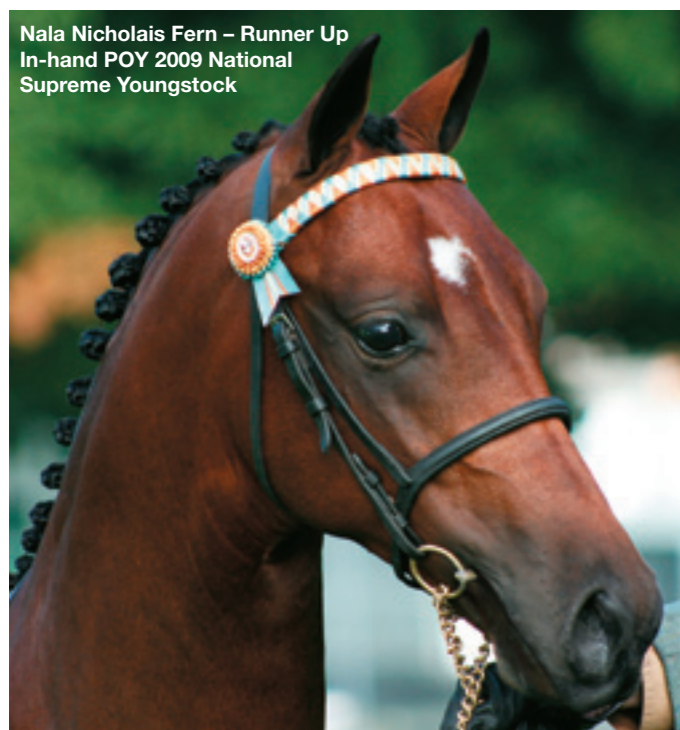
I am always aiming for quality and I am continually striving to produce the perfect animal. It's all about refinement, good limbs and movement. Over the years, we have become really well known for breeding ponies that get off the ground.

We have also become something of an AI station in recent years and offer the astounding 14.2hh British Riding Pony Strinesdale Mastermind at stud. He has always stamped his stock well and is still leaving fabulous foals on the ground. There are a few other stallions that I would like to use in the future, including the champion 12.2hh show pony stallion, Deanhills Royal Portrait who stands at Romano Stud in the UK. I'm just waiting for the right time.

However, even though I love my stallions, one of the most important things for me is to have a strong mare base. We would be nothing without our typey mares producing quality, typey foals. They are worth their weight in gold. One thing I don't do is succumb to pressure from people wanting to buy fillies that I have earmarked for inclusion in the Nala breeding programme. No amount of money will buy these ponies - that is how strong my passion is for improving the standard of show pony breeding in New Zealand.

SC: Will you be back defending your titles at the Horse of the Year Show in 2010?

AW: We're underwater at the moment it has been raining so much! But yes, we will be back out on the circuit soon, hoping to qualify for the Horse of the Year Show. Our first show will be Hawkes Bay A&P in late October. All being well, you will see us battling for our titles again in March 2010.



Nala Nicholai's Fern - Runner Up In-hand POY 2009 National Supreme Youngstock