

INTERVIEW WITH SHOW HUNTER NEW ZEALAND CHAIRPERSON LOUISE BLAIR

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Show Circuit talks to Show Hunter New Zealand Chairperson, Louise Blair, about her first year in the role and her hopes for the future of the sport in this country.

Show Circuit: When did you first get involved in Show Hunter New Zealand?

Louise Blair: When my husband and I were competing at Show Jumping shows the kids wanted to ride too, so I think our first Show Hunter competition for the children was eighteen years ago when my first daughter Emma was about eight. I wanted something that the kids could do at the same time as us and Show Hunter seemed a logical choice as the jumps were lower and the pace was steadier. It was a less scary way of easing them into jumping.

Being the type of person that likes getting involved and having already been on the Show Jumping Waitemata Committee since I was twenty years old, I started to get involved with the running of Show Hunter in my local area. Show Hunter Waitemata was actually created by people from the Show Jumping Waitemata group who wanted to do more for Show Hunter in the area. A small group of people, including myself, formed a sub-committee and worked very hard together to run events including our first Winter Series held at Kelly Park. Our local group has gone from a small committee of three in the early days to fifteen this year.

SC: How did you become Chairperson of Show Hunter New Zealand?

LB: Well, I was the local delegate for Show Hunter Waitemata for at least twelve years, which meant that I attended National Meetings and the Annual Conference on behalf of our group.

From there, I went on to become a National Executive Member, a position I held for four years. After that, moving into the role of Chairperson seemed a natural progression. I'm now in my second year and thoroughly enjoying it. It certainly keeps me busy though!

SC: What are your key duties as Chairperson?

LB: My main responsibility is to represent the Show Hunter discipline on the Show Jumping New Zealand board. I attend regular meetings with the Board where we discuss how to improve the discipline and how to attract more competitors to the sport, among other things. I also liaise on a regular basis with the six Show Hunter Executive Members, all of who have their own responsibilities and there are 20 Area Delegates from throughout the country to keep up to date with what's happening.

SC: How did you find your first year in the position?

LB: We made a lot of alterations in that first year, especially around the judging side of things. This included changing a few of the procedures to do with becoming a Judge. We found that a lot of people were being thrown in at the deep end and needed more support to keep them going. Allowing them the opportunity to sit with experienced Judges for longer is one way of doing this. We are really trying to

address any issues and ensure that our Judges are as well trained and capable as possible.

SC: What do you have planned for this year?

LB: Last year saw a lot of changes so this year we are focussing on bedding those in and getting people used to them. It's the year of implementation.

This year we will also continue to push the NRM Equitation Series for adults (over 21 years), juniors (21 years & under) and children (on ponies) which are judged purely on the riding style and ability of the rider. It has only been up and running for the past three years and is steadily gaining momentum. The first year, we did it without any prizes or sponsorship but now we are in our second year of having a sponsor sorted out and we're working on developing it into a prestigious National Series with some great prizes when it culminates at the NZ Horse of the Year Show.

One thing we are always striving to do is pick up more sponsorship for our High Points Series. We have been very lucky to recently take on both Gyro Plastics to back our Junior High Points and T&M Nurseries to sponsor our Category B Pony High Points. However, we are still looking for sponsors for both our Category A and Category C Pony High Points. Attracting sponsorship is definitely tougher this year so we are very grateful to everyone that is continuing to support us.

SC: Do you think the Show Hunter discipline has changed since you first got involved?

LB: I think things have definitely changed over the years. We watched an old 'Intro to Show Hunter' video a few years back and it was actually quite a laugh. Although the Show Hunter principles haven't changed, the way New Zealanders approach the discipline has. There is a lot more attention to detail and turnout now. I don't see many square saddle blankets around anymore! Most competitors have realised that appearance can be the deciding factor. This doesn't necessarily mean having expensive, flash gear though - it is about having everything nice and clean and plaiting your horse up smartly.

The horses and ponies have become more refined as well. There are more purpose bred horses around, although, I think in a lot of cases it is more that people are brushing up on what they already have. They're making the most out of the horse they have got.

The areas throughout the country are putting much more effort into providing good jumps which are well decorated. The courses have also improved in most instances. These changes can only be positive for the sport. It's great to see the Show Hunter rings looking so attractive with fill at every fence.

SC: Is there anything you would like to change about Show Hunter in New Zealand?

LB: I definitely think more people are recognising the benefits of the Show Hunter classes and of having a horse that can go nicely and rhythmically over jumps. Unfortunately, there is still this mentality that

Show Hunter is a second class citizen to other equestrian sports. Perhaps this is because it is not yet an Olympic discipline or that people don't like hearing what the Judge has to say about their riding and the way their horse goes.

Whatever the reason, we are promoting good riding and solid techniques and it would be great if more people recognised that. I would love to keep heightening the profile and attracting more people to the sport.

We are also in the process of getting the Pony Clubs on board because in many instances they only teach show jumping, eventing and dressage. Many Pony Club Instructors aren't aware of Show Hunter, as it is not specifically taught in their exams. Although, the recent introduction of the Pony Club Show Hunter Championships held in the lower North Island has gone a long way to rectify this. We are trying to encourage Pony Club's to hold Show Hunter Seminars to improve their knowledge of the discipline. It makes sense to me as it is important for children to be taught correct, safe jumping techniques. It would hopefully also lead to parents looking for the right type of pony - something safe and steady that can help their children learn how to execute smooth, flowing rounds.

SC: How is Show Hunter in New Zealand different to the United States?

LB: In the United States, Hunters are hugely popular and there are classes for every type of rider. You can stay in one division and never do anything else. To me, that's probably a bit boring for New Zealand - I like the way we have adapted the programme to suit our riders.

One thing I really like the sound of is their two-round Hunter Derby classes. Each round is scored so that spectators can understand who the leaders are from one round to the next. The first jumping round consists of an elaborate course of jumps resembling the hunt field and includes a healthy variety of both verticals and oxers. The top twelve scoring horses then return for a 'handy hunter' round, which demonstrates a horse's versatility, willingness, and athleticism. These courses usually require sharp turns, bending lines, and trot fences. The USHJA (United States Hunter Jumper Association) is hoping to turn Hunter Derby into an international Show Hunter competition which could be really exciting. It would be great to have the opportunity to showcase our horses on the international stage.

SC: Do you still compete in Show Hunter classes yourself?

LB: In my early days I rode competitively going to Pony Club Champs several times and also riding at B Grade Show Jumping level. I started riding in Show Hunters in the early 90's on a fabulous Show Hunter we bred called PERCIVAL GULL. However, sadly, a bad hunting accident put an end to that. My daughter, Emma, still rides and she is hoping to bring one of her young horses out as a Show Hunter this season. She is particularly interested in the equitation classes. My husband, Lance, also rides his young horses in the Show Hunter ring.

SC: If you could bring one trainer in from overseas to train our New Zealand Show Hunter riders who would it be?

Louise Blair: We've had some great trainers here from the US and Canada both in the past and more recently. However, it would be a fantastic opportunity to have George Morris here from the United States. As well as training the USA Show Jumping Team, he is also a renowned Hunter Instructor and is considered to be one of the most influential trainers in the history of equestrian sports. It would be amazing to get him over to hold a clinic here.

Show Circuit: Who do you think has had the most positive influence on Show Hunter in New Zealand over the years?

Louise Blair: I think this is quite a hard question to answer because there have been quite a few people who have made considerable contributions to Show Hunter in New Zealand. Those who stand out for me are the McAteer family who introduced the concept of Show Hunter to our country back in the early 80's, Rosalie Haddock, a long time competitor and executive member, Des Lowe, a long time trainer who has spent time upgrading his coaching skills in the US each winter and the late Peter Neville. Also, Sally Dyer, Jennie Pike, Jill Ulrich, Gail Goodwin and Marilyn Vincent. Over the years, high profile riders such as Bruce Goodin, Vaughn Jefferis, Mark Todd, Penny Stevenson and Katie McVean have all taken part in Show Hunter.

SC: What would you say to riders considering giving Show Hunter a go?

LB: Some people seem to be under the impression that Show Hunter is easier than the other disciplines but it is actually harder than it looks! It's a real challenge and this is what keeps a lot of people coming back. They want to keep improving and picking up higher placings. You do have to get used to the fact that the Judge will be critiquing both your riding and the way your horse uses itself over jumps but working your way up the ranks and winning a class is so satisfying. Show Hunter can also help you succeed in other sports, such as show jumping and eventing, as you learn how to see a correct stride and to ride smooth, controlled rounds.

Any rider of any age can compete in Show Hunter so I would definitely recommend giving it a go. It's a great test of you and your horse's ability over fences, plus it is a lot of fun. You will soon see why so many people enjoy it.



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