



ROBERT STEELE

– DAIRY FARMER – SHOW JUMPER

Words: **DEBBIE KNOWLES** Photos: **JAN SUTHERLAND** - www.takethemoment.co.nz

Talking to Robert Steele, you get the impression that life is just great as it is. Unlike most people, seemingly always searching for better things elsewhere, Robert says he enjoys farming, family life, the horses and can't see himself doing anything else in the immediate future.

It's a long day - up every morning at 4.45am to milk two hundred cows (a job in itself) plus general farm chores that go with dairying on 320 acres in Mokoia near Hawera and then, in order to compete, horses to work as well. No wonder he was yawning during this interview - probably the first time he'd sat down in a while!

Robert says he doesn't have any "hard and fast plans for any one day" and the horses come second if, after milking, there is an essential job on the farm that has to be done like fixing machinery breakdowns. Otherwise, after breakfast, he'd ride three or four horses before lunch and return to farm work in the afternoon. He might ride one horse and lead another on the odd day and wife Kelly (nee Ryan) will often ride one as well. Daylight saving is a bonus and, during this time, Robert may ride another horse after dinner.

Robert does a bit of flatwork but doesn't always 'school' his horses as such. He spends time farm riding, giving them a variety of pace work around the big paddocks, hill work and jumps the odd spar or two along the way - they do have to "work properly and not slop along though." He says GOSPEL, being a bit lazy, thrives on the pacework to keep his fitness up. The young horses that need to learn about jumping will do some during the week but, the older competition horses especially once out competing, don't jump much at home. He says he "must get an arena put in one day but we have always been lucky with

this great farm to ride on". **A great believer in keeping his horses "happy," Robert says they are more careful and try for you if you "look after them."**

This must all be a pretty good recipe for successful show jumping as Robert has some major successes under his belt. His current good horse, the homebred GOSPEL is now fourteen years young and by JAGUAR out of a part bred mare that Robert's brother David competed on. GOSPEL has been consistent right from winning the National Seven Year old Championship at the Young Horse Show. GOSPEL and Robert have won two Norwood Gold Cups and a few World Cup rounds including one in Australia. They have represented New Zealand twice and at this year's NZ Horse of the Year Show, were equal second in the Bell Tea Olympic Cup for NZ Show Jumper of the Year.

COUNTRYMAN, a Thoroughbred who raced a couple of times, is by MASTERCLASS and Robert hopes to have him out competing at World Cup level this season. One of Sid Kent's breed, WISHFUL THOUGHT by TELEGRAPH and out of WISHFUL THINKING is returning to competition this season after time off through injury. The balance of the team will be made up of two five year old homebreds.

Robert's father stood the Thoroughbred stallion ALBA years ago and the family has kept the line through three generations. The other line they have kept is that of GOSPEL'S family. Generally, they breed two and buy two a year to keep the team supplied.

Robert has also produced to Grand Prix level DRAKENSBERG (sold to Japan), MIDNIGHT HOUR, WALNUT BROWN (now with Tessa Williams) and COUNTRYMAN. Many will remember his first good horse - the Appaloosa speed machine CAMOUFLAGE who, with much raw talent,

went to C Grade in only two shows - the pair learning as they went. CAMOUFLAGE jumped World Cup rounds; won the Samsung Series and was Speed Horse of the Year.

Robert began riding at five years of age, initially going hunting and to Pony Club. He didn't compete on ponies, only horses, doing a bit of everything in the Pony Club days and specialising in show jumping from age seventeen. He thinks he's "broken every bone in his body growing up with horses."

Speaking of growing up, Robert show jumped in three Young Rider Teams travelling to the South Island with each. He laments that, these days, there doesn't seem to be as many "team" opportunities for riders as everyone is chasing the series classes for overall prizes. Robert enjoys a team environment and has just returned from his third trip to South Africa. He appreciates the overseas team trips as a vehicle for seeing how New Zealand show jumping measures up to other countries. The South Africans, he says, are currently stronger in their horsepower by importing Grand Prix horses from Europe to compete as Young Rider mounts. They also appear to be importing more purpose bred young horses for the sport.

When not show jumping, Robert is Master of the Egmont/Wanganui Hunt and follows a bit of international sport and horseracing. The children's school sports feature in his time off too. Micheyla at twelve years is a bit like Mum Kelly and quite happy enjoying riding horses at home. Amanda, at nine, is keen to compete this season at the shows on her pony. James is six and Matthew is five years. Naturally, Robert and Kelly met at a horse show as Kelly has groomed for such top riders as Mark Todd, John Gray and Jeff McVean.

Robert appreciates the family support he gets especially on show mornings when, after getting the cows in and starting milking, he is able to hand over to someone else and head off to the show.

When asked what he would like to see for the betterment of show jumping in New Zealand, Robert's number one concern is, of course,



for the horses. He would like to see more effort go into the ground conditions at shows. If the ground is "like concrete, people whine, horses go sore and eventually don't last very long. If the ground is looked after, the horses jump well and the competitors are happy. Even if its only sand dumped around the practice fence, it's a help."

For the future, Robert would like to represent New Zealand again, with the right horse, especially at the World Equestrian Games, Olympics and competing in Europe. Go for it Robert, you deserve it, hard work goes a long way towards success.



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