

IT'S AN ART FORM.

An interview with Mark Tarrant of New South Wales, winner of 14 NSW Rider of the Year Titles, 10 National Titles and countless Royal Show Champion Rider wins.

ShowCircuit: When did you start riding, and can you remember your first pony?

Mark Tarrant: I was 13 years old when I first started to ride. I had motorbikes at the time and my sister was bought a pony. Being from a totally non-horsey family the pony was inappropriate for learners and, even though I was very frightened of the 13.3hh black pony called Ben, I took him over and that's where my passion began.

SC: What has been the highlight of your judging career so far?

MT: I am proud to say that I have judged the Horse of the Year Shows in all states and territories in Australia, with the exception of Tasmania. The highlight would have to be judging at the Royal Melbourne Show where, in 2000, I judged the Garryowen and Lady and Gent Riders. Last year I judged Galloways.

SC: What do you look for when judging a rider class?

MT: The first thing we all look for is a beautiful overall picture of the rider and the mount, correct position etc. Then I get a bit technical and look at function. There is an age-old saying: "no foot, no horse". Well I stand by my own theory; "NO SEAT, NO RIDER". There is quite a list of things to look for but, first and foremost, I look for a rider with an independent seat. Not much

else is possible if the rider cannot sit and balance independently of the horse's mouth and be able to ride the horse paces-seated-with a relaxed but driving back and seat. Stillness of the rider is not necessarily high on my list of priorities. Uncontrollable bouncing around of arms and hands is definitely a negative but remember, controlled movements of the arms is necessary to soften the contact at times and to allow the horse to operate without being jammed up and hollowed. On some horses it can be near-impossible to ride with the lower leg perfectly still, particularly when they are going correctly with a soft swingy back. The use of the rider's inside leg is so important and absolutely necessary. If I have a rider whose inside leg is a little busy because they are bouncing their horse forward, that rider earns a brownie point in my book. It is not possible to have a horse moving forward off and/or away from the leg by just squeezing. The horse is more likely to ignore the aid and, more often than not, lean against the rider's leg, which by this time has curled up with toes down. It goes kick-kick-bump-bump until you get a result. There is much more to say on the topic but what I have talked about is the basis of what I believe you should look for in a rider. I think to be a good rider judge, you really should have a little training knowledge and have an understanding of how the horse functions in all paces. I always look for straightness in the changes of canter lead and the transitions into canter. It's not about the type of change or having an educated horse, it's about the rider's ability to train the horse to take the command for canter on the required lead in a straight line; not turning the horse in the direction of the required canter lead. The other thing that is-for me-not negotiable when judging riders, is the sit trot. All ages, all levels, with few exceptions for the safety of some riders, there is always sit trot on the ring and in the workout when I judge. Brings some of the human clamps on horseback undone!!! Know and understand that it is correct for the rider to be sitting ever-so-slightly behind the vertical, to allow the pelvis to go with the horse's back while setting the horse's paces. A rider sitting too straight and stiff is the rider who will have trouble sitting the trot, in particular.

SC: Is judging a child rider class much different to adults? How?

MT: For me, not a lot different. It is common sense to give the lower aged and novice riders easier workouts than the older riders. In bigger competitions one would expect more from the older riders. Again I say that the sit trot should be expected in all age groups. Call me a mean old thing but if they can't sit trot they are not ready, or are too young, to be competing.

SC: What little fault grates on you most when watching riders?

MT: That's a no-brainer for me. I am eternally frustrated watching riders not game and unwilling to move their hands, arms and lower leg to give the horse an aid because of their show-mothers-from-hell, instructor and lots of judges preaching 'keep your hands still; don't move your leg'. Oh! and the clanger; 'turn your toes in'. That's a good idea: turn your toes in and take your lower leg off the horse's side and just steer it like a bike. Idiots!!!

SC: What is the best tip you can offer our riders for Rider classes?

MT: The hard part is that those tips can change, depending on who is judging. So, here is the approach I took from the very early days of competition. I decided I wasn't very pretty and if I were to beat some of those ladies-the likes of Maree Tomkinson-my workouts would have to be more flamboyant and more correct. And how mind-numbingly boring can our sport be to watch! So the show-off in me decided to ramp it up a bit and aim to be as entertaining as possible. If I rode any horse whose trot I found difficult to sit, I made it a priority-no matter how difficult-to master that shortcoming. Teach yourself to be able to teach your horse to go in a straight line and be able to make changes of canter lead without having to turn in the direction of the desired lead. Crooked changes are sloppy and messy and show the rider up to be a lazy trainer. Remember, just giving the correct canter aid to make canter is not enough. First, you need to teach your horse what the signals mean. Very easy to achieve but, you need to be patient. Horse riding/training is a very repetitive process; 99% of people seem to think that a good rider class horse is a well-educated horse that is easy to sit on, is quiet and goes like clockwork.....WRONG.....BORING.....BORING. Learn to ride big soft bouncy movement instead of looking for an easy ride. Remember, it is rarely easy. It's about making it look easy. Top level dancers and gymnasts make what they do look a breeze. They finish their routine gasping for air and dripping with



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sweat. Stand out and be noticed for the right reasons. Not because you have one of those gaudy new riding coats with bells and whistles or because you have a Swarovski crystal door knob on the end of your whip. It can be a hard journey to travel. I lost as many titles as I have won for simply riding the same as when I had previously won. Different judges, different opinions. Dishonest and negative judging. Honest judges with a shallow depth of knowledge. Be prepared to be confused and disappointed at times.

SC: How do the NZ riders compare to the Aussies in your opinion?

MT: I believe a good rider is a good rider, regardless of the discipline. Some of your top-end riders compare with ours. However, the depth and overall quality of our riders is superior, due only, I am sure, to the fact that our show horse industry in most of Australia is bigger. There are a greater number of competitors and competitions and a strong competitive nature between the professional coaches whose job it is to produce successful riders. There are a large number of professional riders, trainers and producers of show horses, whose full-time job it is year-round. I believe also that you guys have a relatively short showing season and traditionally your horses are turned out in the off season. Here we can be showing most of the year round and I and the majority of trainers tend not to turn horses out. Winter for me is the opportunity to further their education and keep them on the improve. I don't understand about tossing them out for months just to start again.

SC: What is the funniest thing you have seen as a judge?

MT: I was judging the preliminary heats of the ponies at the Victorian Horse of the Year Show. A bay pony entered the ring who had been recently body clipped. Obviously he had gone that awful yellow colour so, like true showies, they had run a tint over the pony, normally a good idea. In this case, though, they got the colour wrong. It was a very edible-looking crimson/pink colour. Nice... Different...Unusual!!!

SC: What tips can you offer our judges here?

MT: You don't necessarily need to be a good rider to judge riders but I do believe you need some training knowledge. You need to understand how the horse functions and understand the signals given to the horse from the rider to

educate the horse to have it working at the level required to compete. Sit in on some lessons with riders and horses of all levels. Don't be too insular. Listen in on some dressage lessons, for example. Pick the trainers as I would. The ones who have worked with and understand the hotter blooded horses us showies are destined to work with; the trainers with a proven record of training horses and/or riders. Be open-minded, too, as there always seems to be exceptions to the rule when training horses.

SC: Which other judge(s) do you respect the opinions of?

MT: As a general rule, the better rider class judges are the ones whose own training and riding is more dressage-based or who have had some sort of dressage knowledge in their background. Three people who have awarded me top rider titles, whose opinion I respect and am proud to have won under are: Vince Corvi, arguably Australia's most respected horse trainer whose record of performance in his hey-day will never be equalled; Helen Page (néé Crowley) who's most famous horse-MOLIERE-was awarded multi Royal Show Champions. MOLIERE and others trained by Helen always worked to perfection; Jennie Loriston-Clarke (UK). This lady is a well-known and respected trainer and competitor of FEI level horses throughout the UK and Europe and has bred and shown ponies and show horses. These are three riders who are worth watching do their thing, even on young or green horses.

SC: Are there any goals left you would like to achieve?

MT: I am proud to say there is no major Rider Award in Australia that I haven't won and, in most cases, won on several occasions and on many different horses at different levels of education – 14 NSW Rider of the Year titles, 10 National Titles and countless Royal Show Champion Rider wins. With the exception of the odd Royal Show rider class, I have retired from riding competitions. However, I very much enjoy training young horses, ex race horses and problem horses, seeing to what level of training and education I can achieve with them and then doing my best to successfully compete these horses. There are endless titles for show horses to win and if I am fortunate enough to have the correct blank canvas or quality animal under me, therefore are endless goals.

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