



STRIVING FOR SHOW

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Since the Show Hunter discipline was first introduced to New Zealand around twenty years ago, it has become hugely popular among Kiwi equestrians of all ages. Its ever-growing attractiveness seems to be rooted in the lack of elitism associated with the sport in this country. Pretty much any rider, on any breed or type of horse has a realistic shot at stardom.

Top Show Hunter Rider and Instructor, Tracey Page, shares her Show Hunter Secrets...

'Show Hunter is a highly inclusive sport in which anyone has the potential to excel,' smiles Tracey Page, a well respected Show Hunter Instructor based at Raider Lodge in Kumeu. 'Classes cater for everyone, from the seven and eight year olds on their under 13hh Category A ponies, to riders pushing 80 years of age. There are very few restrictions on who can take part.'

Tracey has enjoyed a fair share of success herself since she started competing twelve or so years ago. Recent achievements have included claiming the Amateur Show Hunter Horse of the Year title class at the Horse of the Year Show in both 2008 and 2009, aboard her 12 year old 16.1hh bay Thoroughbred gelding HEZAKIWI, affectionately known as 'Buddy' at home. The talented duo also achieved an impressive second place in the open class earlier this year.

The Show Hunter sport originates from foxhunting and this heritage can still be seen in the format of the classes today. Competitors show over a maximum of ten fences that simulate obstacles found in a field hunt. Jumps such as stone walls, hedges and coops are often used as well as natural coloured poles. Turns

are never overly sharp, as is often found on a show jumping course and courses are generally designed so that they are simple, flow nicely and are easy for horse and rider to follow.

According to the Show Hunter Rulebook, all Show Hunters are judged on their jumping form, with their style or 'bascule' the number one priority. A horse should jump with its knees up and square, with uneven knees or 'hanging a leg' marked down as serious faults. A horse is said to 'hang' when the forearm is in a more vertical position (knee pointing toward the ground) as opposed to horizontal position (knee pointing straight ahead) over a fence. This is undesirable as a horse that 'hangs' runs the risk of hitting the jump with its forearm and causing an accident.

'Any horse or pony is capable of becoming an elite Show Hunter in New Zealand as Judges are not biased towards a specific type or breed. However, they do need to be well schooled and have a good jump,' explains Tracey. 'They should have a good front end and be able to pick their legs up well. Their jump needs to be nice and round.'

'This requirement can be traced back to the sport's foxhunting legacy,' she points out. 'To cope with the challenging, rustic jumps out on the hunting field, a horse needed to be able to tuck its knees up neatly. If it wasn't capable of doing this, both horse and rider would soon have found themselves in a whole lot of trouble!'

In addition to their style and form over fences, hunters are assessed on the manner in which they travel to each fence. The horse should maintain a



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good pace throughout the course of jumps, but keep an even rhythm, neither speeding up nor slowing down. The horse is also judged on its smoothness around the course, its movement and whether it reaches each 'spot', or the distance of takeoff in front of a jump, correctly.

On top of all that, Show Hunter Judges expect winning horses to have excellent manners and a willing temperament. ***The overall picture should be of a relatively relaxed, easy, comfortable ride and the ring-side observer should have to peer very closely indeed to see any interaction going on between horse and rider.***

'My pet hate is the occasional rider who comes along and enters a Show Hunter class because they think they will snap up an easy ribbon,' grimaces Tracey. 'You watch the horse taking a strong hold and galloping around the fences like a lunatic. It completely goes against the point of the class as there is no way on earth you would be able to take that kind of horse out hunting, over full wire fences.'

'It's a disciplined sport. It's not just clear round show jumping - there's a lot more to it. The sport is based on style and control and is much more challenging than a lot of people would imagine. The experts make it look easier than it actually is!'

On top of the poor form and overzealous approach that Tracey has already touched on, there are several other areas in which both beginner and more experienced combinations can lose valuable points:

Refusals and Run Outs: To be considered for a placing in a Show Hunter

class you must clear all of the fences. Having a refusal, which means stopping in front of the fence without jumping it, is a major fault and will be scored as such. A run-out, when a horse goes past the extended horizontal line of the jump is also a major fault. You must approach and jump the fence to complete the course.

A horse must get to each jump and its form over the fence is considered. If it cannot get over the fence then it is a serious fault. A circle at the beginning of a round and a closing circle at the end are permitted. However, any other circles will be counted as a refusal.

To prevent refusals and run-outs at horse shows, work with your trainer to ensure that you and your horse are ready for competition. Know the requirements of the level you are showing in and practice this height of fence at home. It is also helpful to have similar types of fences to school over when training so your horse is not surprised by flowers, brush or coops when they are at a show.

If there are few participants in a class a refusal or run-out may get a low placing.

Knock Downs: A fence is considered to have been knocked down when the pole is no longer resting in the support. A knock down is a major fault and is scored as such. A perfectly good round can be destroyed by an untimely rail. A knockdown is considered a major fault.

To prevent knock downs, while on course, prepare your horse for the show season with a systematic training program to develop your riding and your horse. Gymnastics will develop strength and agility and also prepare the rider for the courses.

Uneven Rhythm: The judge's first reaction to a show hunter round should be, 'that was a nice even round.' If they are holding, white knuckled, onto their chair, chances are you are going too fast or steadying in the corners and zooming down the lines towards the jumps.

Wrong Leads: Having a wrong lead around the ends of the arena can make the horse unbalanced and they often have a bad fence after. Wrong leads will certainly knock you out of the ribbons. A dis-united or cross canter will also lower your placing.

Adding in or Leaving Out Strides: The distance between each fence in Show Hunter is usually a set number of strides, with each stride 12 feet in length. Unlike a Show Jumper, the Show Hunter does not need to go to extreme lengths to collect or extend its stride to meet the distances correctly. The Show Hunter is expected to put a certain amount of strides between each set of fences if they are in a line. If the horse and rider don't do this, points will be taken off the overall score.

Missed Jump/Bad Spots: To be considered for a placing, particularly in a large class, a 'chip' (a short stubby stride just before the fence) will ruin your chances. Likewise for an overly long stride or reaching for the fence on take-off.

Bad Movement: This is a tricky one. If the horse has cleared the fences with good form, even rhythm, the right striding and on the correct lead then you are doing well and should reap the rewards. However, it is important to bear in mind that if your horse is an average mover up against a pack of superior movers of the same jumping ability, the horse with the correct form and better movement will place higher.

While the ability of the Show Hunter mount is often under scrutiny, it is important to remember that the horse is only one part of the equation. The rider must be equally skilled - especially in the popular Show Hunter Equitation Classes where the rider's position is also judged. Important areas of aptitude include having good upper body control and being able to stay with the horse over fences without stiffening up. The rider should have a good seat, be able to see good distances to the jumps and be experienced enough to know how much to release over fences, so that they impede the horse as little as possible.

'Riders should employ a half-seat or 'two point' position while jumping courses, depending on the type of course and height of fences,' advises Tracey. 'They should have a balanced seat with a secure lower leg position, weight in the heels, soft hands, good posture and eyes up. They should form an attractive picture as they canter around a course of fences, with their eyes up, always looking ahead to the next obstacle.'

As the Judge critiques each round, they keep score with their own personal series of cryptic symbols to remind them of how the horse performed. Each fence is marked with a code to reflect how the horse jumped. Examples include marking 'R' for refusal, 'K' for a knock down and 'XL' for wrong leads. The fewer marks, the better the score. It can take time for a competitor to pick up exactly how Show Hunter is judged and what they can do to avoid racking up marks. Fortunately, there are resources out there that can help fast-forward this learning curve.

'If you contact Equestrian Sports New Zealand, they will send you a free guide, which includes all the Judge's symbols and rules for Show Hunter,' advises Tracey. 'It is an invaluable source of information for anyone starting out in the sport.'

In Show Hunter, as with all other equestrian



disciplines, 95% of the class is won at home and many of the aforementioned faults can be avoided with good training. The right preparation and schooling, to develop the ability of both horse and rider, is the only way to achieve any real degree of success.

'Preparation at home is absolutely vital,' agrees Tracey. 'Firstly, I would recommend bringing an experienced instructor into the mix. A knowledgeable instructor will work with you to make sure you've mastered basic skills on the flat before you tackle the jumping side of things.'

'Flatwork is an essential part of training for Show Hunter,' explains Tracey. 'If you cannot control your horse's pace and length of stride on the flat, you'll never do it over jumps. It's also important to get your horse going on a soft rein, with a yielding, relaxed neck.'

'Once you have moved onto your jump training, make sure you concentrate on fitting the required number of strides between your fences, taking off at the correct point and simply making the overall round look easy and stress-free'

'Another area to pay attention to is your flying changes,' adds Tracey. 'A successful Show Hunter must be able to cleanly make flying changes when necessary. You will definitely lose points if you break into trot.'

Clearly, the jumping side of Show Hunter plays a crucial part in whether you are placed or not. However, overall presentation is very important too and should be of an extremely high standard. In fact, if a Judge is ever undecided between two top horses, the level of turnout can often be the tie-breaker.

'Presentation is very important and you will lose points for bad turnout,' warns Tracey. 'It's all to do with the Judge's first impression when you enter the ring. All horses must have plaited manes and a neatly braided or pulled tail. When it comes to tack, a plain brown cavasson snaffle bridle is the norm, although double bridles are also permitted. No flash noseband or any other kind of noseband below the bit is allowed.'

'A shaped saddle blanket is looked upon much more favourably than a bulky, square cut one. The idea is to show the horse off as much as possible, not cover them up with acres of material.'

'Physically, the horse should be in good overall shape and shining with good health,' adds Tracey.

'Most competitors trim their horse's faces, including the whiskers around the muzzle, ear hair, the bridle path and along the lower jaw. The legs are also usually trimmed, removing all fetlock hair and feathering and trimming the pasterns and coronet'

'A good wash and regular grooming in the run up to the show will encourage a clean, glossy coat. Then all you need is a little hoof oil and last minute polish before you head into the ring to highlight the good conditioning work that has been done at home.'

The turnout of the rider should match the smart presentation of the horse. The rider should be wearing cream jodhpurs or breeches and a smart riding jacket of any colour. Children should be dressed in short jodhpur boots, while adults should ride in long riding boots.

Every year, the ability of horse and rider competing in Show Hunter climbs a bit further. **Moreover, the horses appearing in these classes have reached such a high standard that they are attracting increasing attention from overseas.** In recent times, a number of talented New Zealand bred equines have quietly been snapped up by deep-pocketed international buyers, predominantly based in that Show Hunter Mecca, the United States.

'We are definitely catching the eye of the Show Hunter community outside New Zealand,' says Tracey. 'They know that we are producing quality horses with beautiful movement, great attitudes and a natural affinity for the kind of jumping that the Show Hunter sport requires. It's definitely something for us to be proud of.'

Tracey, like many supporters of the discipline, hopes that in time more New Zealand horse owners will recognise the value and benefits Show Hunter can offer.

'Riders should bear in mind that Show Hunter does not have to be the be all and end all,' says Tracey. 'While many focus solely on the sport, others use it as a training ground for young horses that are ultimately destined for eventing or the show jumping ring. It's great for producing a horse that can execute flowing, correct rounds, as well as more confident, skilled riders. It's a fantastic way to introduce our future champions to competitive equestrian sport.'

More information on Show Hunter, including rules, schedules and class guidelines, can be found at www.nzequestrian.org.nz