



HORSES & US

TRUE STORIES OF HORSES AND THEIR HUMANS

JOHANNA EMENEV



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Dedicated to Amaria and to Ezra,
the new baby equestrians of Manaia
and Erica. Aroha nui, little ones.



LISA ALLEN

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INTRODUCTION



I remember the day I fell in love with horses. I was 13, it was a hot afternoon, and the setting was, unusually, a classroom. A big bay escapee from the local pony club was clip-clopping around our middle-school courtyard, looking in through the windows.

My friend Emily ran out of class, improvised a halter with her school cardigan, and started leading him home. I asked the teacher if I could go with Emily along the busy main road, and she said yes. Those were the days.

During the half-hour walk to return him, I became smitten with the big, handsome animal beside me, who was wearing a mallard-green cardi around his neck and strolling along with two school kids as if it was just a normal thing for a horse to do on a weekday afternoon.

We weren't in any hurry to get back to class, so we'd stop every few minutes to give him a bit of grass, and Emily would tell me snippets of information about her own pony, Gem, who she kept at the same club grounds. Of course, we took a little time to visit Gem once we had arrived at our destination, and so my last class of the day was Equine Infatuation for Beginners.

Soon afterwards, I begged my parents for lessons at nearby Riverside Riding School. Those hours quickly became the highlight

of my week, and it wasn't long before I was doing little chores like holding horses for the farrier, feeding out hay or getting horses ready for weekend hacks so I could be there more often.

The school holiday opportunities were also brilliant. A group of us would ride out to the local forest, go bareback around the roads, stay on week-long horse camps, and take part in competitions. I could be independent in a way I couldn't be at home. Occasionally, I'd be given a tricky pony to try to school, and there aren't many better feelings than managing to stay in the saddle during a great big buck or taking a wobbly youngster out for that first gallop.

What I got from Riverside Riding School was more than tuition in riding and horse care; it was the kind of passionate freedom that comes with discovering something you love and being allowed to enjoy it without too many rules and restrictions.

Like many people, I had a big break from horses in my adult years, when work got in the way of horseplay. However, a few years ago I was lucky enough to return to riding. After I found my dream pony, the absolute joy of being with an equine best friend came back to me like muscle memory. This made me think hard about the bond between human and horse. How special it is. Being a writer-type person, I decided to find real stories from across Aotearoa New Zealand that show what can be achieved when humans and horses come together.

It is such a privilege, writing books, because through them I am able to share the things that make me feel happy and full of optimism. I hope the stories in *Horses & Us* will be uplifting and motivating for readers — and that, even if you have never ridden a horse, you will appreciate the remarkable people, ponies and horses it features. Every one of them has been an inspiration to me.



1. AMAZING BLAZING BILLY

This chapter is illustrated by Sarah Laing.

OUR STORY



Johanna Emeney and her dream pony,
Amazing Blazing Billy. MARIA GOBBIE

When I found my dream pony, Billy, he was 19 years old. My friend Lynette was letting me borrow her semi-retired Arab mare, Belle, and we would ride out together two or three times a week. Our route invariably passed Billy's paddock, which was just across the road from Lynette's place. Typically, he would be standing there with his head over the gate and his ears pricked forward, looking very interested. I'd usually say something about how cute he was, and how much his wide, white blaze and his mischievous expression reminded me of my first pony.

At that time, I was on a mission to find a horse of my own. I had made roughly 40 trips up and down the motu, and still no unicorn. I was beginning to think that maybe it was just different as an adult: you didn't get the 'falling in love' feeling you had as a teenager, when you rode your perfect pony for the first time.

I continued to admire Billy on our weekly hacks, and so Lynette suggested that I ask his owners whether I might be able to have a ride on him. After all, he didn't seem to be doing very much. It turned out that the owners had bought Billy for their grandson, but the cheeky chestnut had proved a bit too strong. So he was now a paddock mate for their granddaughter's pony.

Well, I can't speak for Billy, but for me it was 'love at first sit'. I hopped on him bareback, and we went for a little walk down the road. It was like having my first pony back. Later, I'd learn that Billy had all the same gears as my first pony, too: slow walk, crazy-train trot, beautiful canter, and a gallop we really didn't need to investigate at our two ages. He is the kind of pony who's not for everyone, but if he's for you, he's 100 per cent for you.

Long story short, I begged the owners to let me buy Billy, and they were good enough to agree. Lynette said we could graze with her, so he didn't have far to move — about 10 metres across the road — but it made all the difference to me, because now he was mine. We could go to the beach, the forest, around the roads, to our local pony club — wherever and whenever we wanted. I would be Billy's last owner, and I'd spoil him silly.

I knew somehow, from the moment I first interacted with Billy — the first time I went to catch him, feed him, brush him — that in the past he had been the dream pony of one or two young kids. He acted as if he knew what it was like to be loved and special. He was absolutely familiar with the words 'handsome', 'good boy' and 'treat'. He also had beautiful manners, and he was always careful around me.



He loved treats, but he would never nip; if you didn't have a treat, or if they were all gone, he would just stand there licking your hand and arm for ages. He placed his feet with care, making sure not to step too close, and when the time came for him to walk up next to the mounting block, he would align himself perfectly, knowing exactly where to stand so I could get up easily. I'd never been good at opening gates on horseback, but the first time I aimed Billy at a gate he did the moves like an old hand.



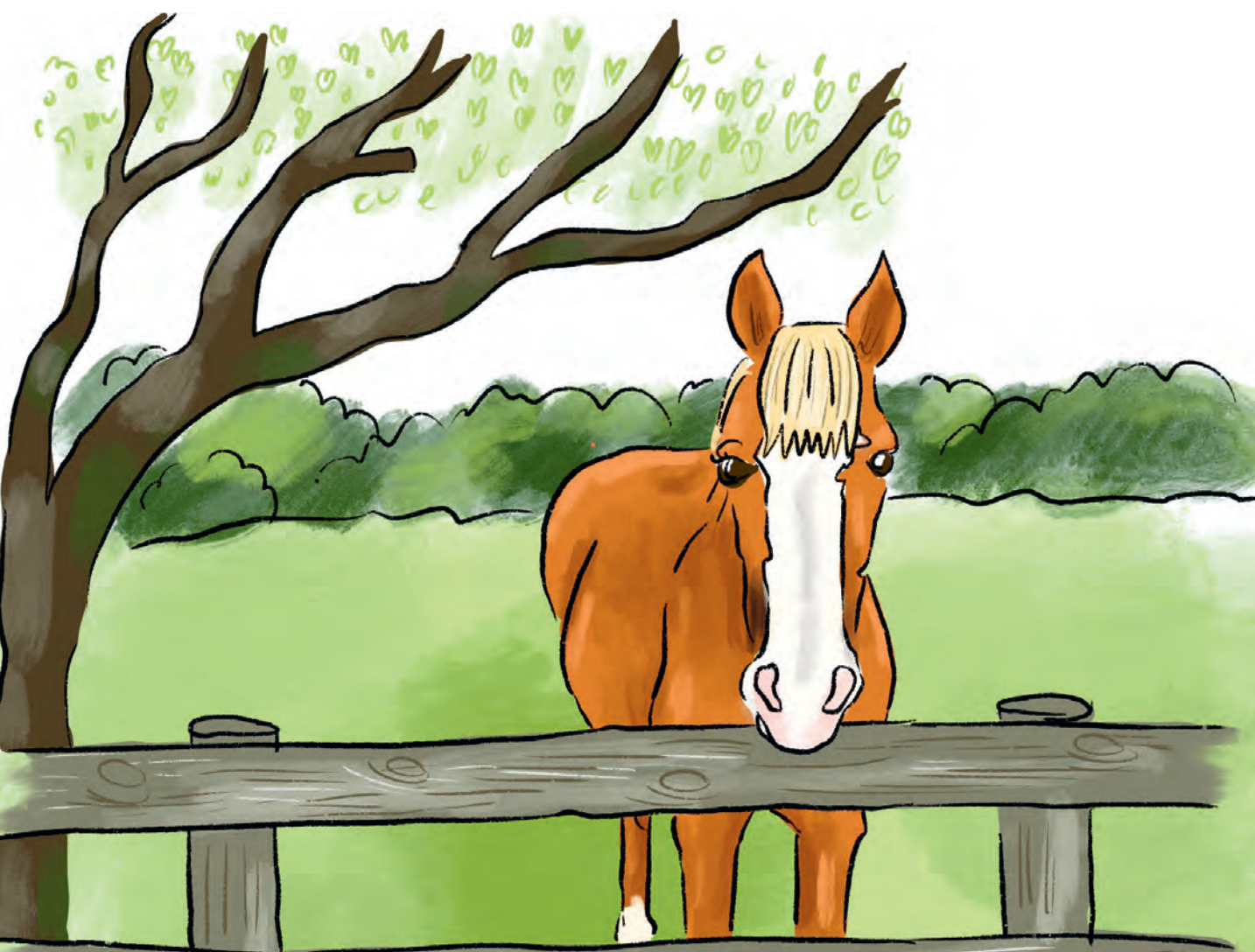
Based on my hunch that Billy had been a much-loved pony before, I started doing a bit of research about his past. I wanted to find his earlier owners to let them know that old Billy Boy was alive and 'kicking up his heels' with me. It sounds a little bit crazy, but I felt deep down inside that they would want to know.

My search pretty much started and ended on social media, where



just inputting Billy's rather original show name yielded the results I was after. Two girls, Claudia and Erica, had owned Amazing Blazing Billy before he'd shifted across the road from Lynette, and it looked like they'd both done wonderful things with him. I messaged them with pictures of our distinctive chestnut gelding, with his white blaze and flaxen mane and tail, and got instant replies with numerous photos and stories about all of the adventures they had gone on with him.

It turned out that Claudia had owned Billy from the time he was 18 months old. He had stayed with Claudia until he was nine and she was 14. He then went to 13-year-old Erica, who owned him until she was 19, and he was 15. These two girls — today, young women in their mid-twenties — had loved and spoiled him for most of his life, and now it was my turn. Getting to know their Billy stories helped me to get to know him better, and reminded me of the incredible bond that can form between horses and us.





2. UNBRIDLED CREATIVITY



The Equestrian's Shelf
by Michelle Clarke.



Thirty thousand years ago, Palaeolithic people were painting images of horses in caves and making small carvings of them from the tusks of woolly mammoths. Since then, artists have continued to be fascinated by equine subjects across all sorts of creative fields.

Heroic horse characters feature in written and oral tales all over the world, ancient and modern, mythic and real. We often watch these incredible narratives on TV or at the movies, with horse-masters and stunt riders bringing to life the fantastic feats described in screenplays.

On the pages that follow, you will meet an inspiring stuntwoman, an artist whose paintings focus on the relationship between people and horses, a girl whose gelding was painted by mural artist Mr G, an equine photographer and artist who started her own business, and a famous author of best-selling pony books.



Dayna as an Amazon in *Wonder Woman 1984*. DAYNA POMARE PAI

DAYNA POMARE PAI (*Ngā Puhī*)

HŪNUA, TĀMAKI MAKĀURAU AUCKLAND

Skill as a rider won Dayna Pomare Pai her first stunt-double role at 17. Since then, she has doubled for stars including Charlize Theron, Gwyneth Paltrow, Ingrid Bolsø Berdal, Tilda Swinton and Lucy Lawless. In 2020, she played one of the Amazons in *Wonder Woman 1984*. Dayna is the owner of New Zealand Stunt School. When she's not teaching, choreographing or stunting, Dayna and her tutors teach kids to fly at Disability Sport Auckland.

In 2024 she founded a charity called NZ Action Film Foundation, which encourages people from underprivileged and at-risk communities into film work. Dayna trains horses to do stunts for film and television, and she enjoys the challenge of finding each new horse's talent. She often asks her dad for help with the hōiho at her place, and benefits from his years of experience.



Two pintos — the rodeo on parade down Queen Street,
Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland in 1983. DAYNA POMARE PAI

I could ride before I could walk. My dad made a contraption out of leather strapping that would hold me in the saddle, and I would fall asleep up there, walking and trotting along beside him on his hōiho during long cattle drives in Te Rohe Pōtae the King Country.

It wasn't too long before I could ride without being tied on. I remember getting around on big ponies as well as small ones, and even taking my dog along for a few treks across the property. There wasn't much I was afraid to do. Horseback was my second home.

My father is Jim Pomare. When I was young, he was a horse trainer and rodeo manager. His twin brother, my uncle Bill Pomare, was the first Māori owner-trainer of an Auckland Cup winner. Riding is definitely in my DNA, but I pursued a life with horses myself. I loved living up close with hōiho whenever I stayed at my dad's. His house — which combined shelter for humans and horses — was my kind of heaven.

Now, my family and I live in one house and Dad lives in the other. We share one block of land, with our horses all around us — as well as



Like father, like daughter: Dayna and her dad, Jim Pomare. DAYNA POMARE PAI

my pet sheep, Cookie, and my mule, Jack. It's like a little girl's dream come true. Dad is just next door, always on hand to help with my hōiho, by putting shoes on, fixing their backs or just giving me advice on how I might approach a training session.

My pāpā has always been a gutsy, capable rider and horseman. Back in the day, he was also a champion arm wrestler. When I was a kid, he was my role model for how to be tough and resilient, and he taught me how to take the knocks and make my own luck. I used his example in my young life, getting along to pony club on the problem ponies that other kids couldn't do much with, and sitting some dirty bucks because I wanted the ride.

I've needed that resilience in my adult life, too. I've had quite a few injuries on film sets, like a dagger that went through my cheek in a fight scene for *Legend of the Seeker*, and multiple nose-breaks and neck injuries from falls, staged and otherwise. I love the adrenaline rush, the world travel, the artistry of stunt work, and the joy of working with the film industry's best actors and being able to enhance their performances. I also love teaching people who are keen to get into this





Dayna, fierce and fabulous. DIANE DAVENPORT (LEFT) DAYNA POMARE PAI (RIGHT)

business, because it is a great one, particularly for rangatahi who are driven, athletic and intuitive.

Doubling for an actor is exciting and challenging. It involves taking notice of details and being part of a team. If you pay a lot of attention while your actor is rehearsing and working in front of the camera, you can learn to mimic her gestures and her way of walking and moving. Being able to recreate the actor's style helps to make the stunt scenes believable and merge into the film or programme as a whole.

I have ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder). But I only found this out once I became an adult. I didn't do well at school because I found it hard to concentrate during lessons and to keep up with my homework. The teachers probably got frustrated with me because they thought I didn't put in the mahi. I remember being told that I'd never make anything of myself. I don't hold it against them: no one really knew about ADHD or neurodiversity then, but it was a pretty harsh thing to say to a kid, and it has



obviously stuck with me. I certainly wouldn't want any young person to be told that today.

Luckily, I knew I was good at some things: gym and dancing — and, most of all, my work with horses. People were always praising my riding, and Dad had given me difficult horses to train since I was eight. Those things made me feel special. When I look back now, I believe that the hyperfocus you get with ADHD — where you concentrate really intently on the things that you are passionate about — is what made me successful. I would practise and practise until I could do tricks, and I enjoyed that repetition. It wasn't a chore. I've never lost my drive to train horses or to do stunts, and they've both brought me massive satisfaction in my career.

I have the same attitude to horses as I have to people: find what they are good at, and it will become their superpower. I have a new little mare who loves to roll. I'm not going to tell her off for that; she will be my lie-down horse — as soon as I can manage to get my command in *before* she drops! The same goes for rearing horses. The ones who do it naturally carry out the rear as a kind of joyous





Left: My lie-down horse. *Right:* Issy, mentored by the best. BOTH IMAGES MARIA GOBBIE

thing when you ask them. Horses who are made to do it when it's not a natural movement for them will show the strain in their body language. It is so much easier to allow the horses to tell you what their talents are. Like humans, they will let you know sooner or later.

I was 17 and working in a café in Tāmaki Makaurau when someone suggested that I should try out for the stunt-double role in the TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Although I had no idea what that would involve, I went along, and I got the job based on how I could ride. The work just kept coming in after that, so I was lucky — my life with horses and my dedication to them had made me ready for the opportunities that lay ahead.

To have contributed to huge productions like *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *Snow White and the Huntsman*, *Hercules*, *Wonder Woman 1984* and *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* is a massive source of pride. I also feel really satisfied when I think about the people I'm mentoring at New Zealand Stunt School, and the tamariki and rangatahi we help when we visit Disability Sport Auckland, because just as much as I enjoy using my skills on screen, I get equal pleasure from sharing and passing them on — doing what my pāpā did for me.





3. RISING FAST



Kelsey Hannan on Big Mike. MARIA GOBBIE



It takes hard work to be a young person competing in equestrian sports. Horses mean commitment; it's not possible to ride competitively without maintaining a high level of fitness for yourself and your horse, and that comes from regular, dedicated exercise.

Some of the young equestrians you will meet in this chapter came from non-horsey homes; others were surrounded by all things equestrian from an early age. What they have in common is a passion for horses and a drive to compete. Also, and perhaps crucially, they are able to take the downs along with the ups, and ride the bucks.

Invaluable mentoring has enabled these rangatahi to learn horsemanship skills alongside life skills. The humans and horses who have taught them are credited with much of their success. Across a variety of disciplines – dressage, mounted games, racing, eventing, show jumping – these young riders are competing against the best in Aotearoa New Zealand and, in some cases, the world.



Ben with Poppy and Celestial. MARIA GOBBIE

BEN WEIR

WAITOKI, TĀMAKI MAKĀURAU

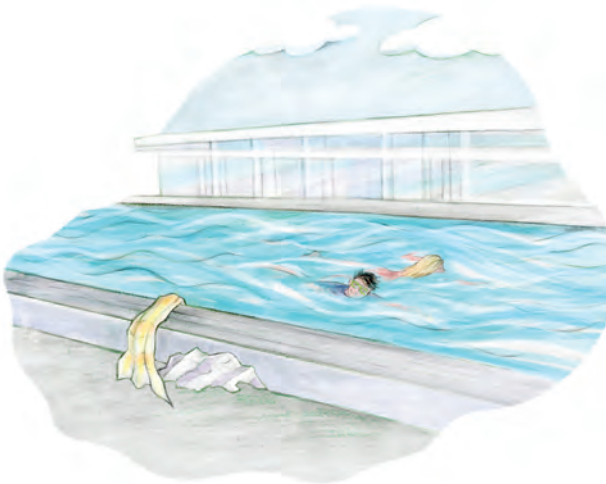
Ben Weir is a full-time rider, coach and trainer who has his sights set on the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. His background, however, is not in the least horsey; there is no family tree with equestrian-laden branches. Ben simply started riding at 10, when his sister, Emma, got a pony. After a two-year ride-share with Emma, he managed to persuade his mum and dad to buy him a horse. Coaches were quick to see Ben's potential, and he rapidly amassed win after win in show jumping and dressage, cantering away with prestigious Young Rider titles in both disciplines. Now, based between his parents' Waitoki property and Vaughn Jefferis's yard in Mātangi, Waikato, Ben is taking some time to gain experience in the ring so he can work towards an overseas campaign.



definitely wasn't born with the pony genes. As a youngster, I was into more typical sports like tennis, cricket, hockey and rugby.

Then my sister, Emma, got a pony — the gorgeous Poppy.

At first, I would hang around the Dairy Flat Pony Club watching Emma ride, or we would take turns on Poppy going for uphill gallops. We didn't really have any idea what we were doing, but we did know it was a load of fun. I have vivid memories of us doubling to the public pool and tying Poppy to the fence while we had our swim, then trotting home, Emma and I dipping into a bag of hot, salty chips from the local shop. Poppy was a saint, and she showed me what my passion in life was going to be.



Soon it was clear to my parents that the ride-share situation wasn't very fair on my sister, so they bought me my first little horse, Cooper. He could jump well and he gave me confidence. Poppy and Cooper shaped my tweens and teens, and they kickstarted my riding career. I owe them both a lot. Poppy is in her late twenties and is still hugely loved. She resides permanently at my Waikato base. Cooper, now also in his twenties, is still owned by us, but he is retired with a friend in Waitoki.

One of my other early influences, and still very much in my life over a decade on, is dressage rider, coach and Equestrian Sports New Zealand judge Melissa Steed. Even before I got Cooper, I remember watching Melissa hold dressage clinics at the arena next door. I was spellbound by the things Melissa had her riders doing, and I wanted to learn how to do them. When I got Cooper, I didn't just want to attend pony club, I wanted to have dressage lessons.

It wasn't long before Melissa invited me to ride her rather feisty young pony, which was quite a compliment. She noticed the things that came naturally to me and praised me for them, but she could also see what needed to be improved. She taught me everything — not only in terms of dressage, but later, too, with my training and coaching business.

In recent years, Melissa has also allowed me to compete on her amazing gelding NPE Del Rico. Rico is such a sensitive horse, and full of personality. I have to ride exactly the right way to get the best from him, so it's very rewarding when we accomplish a great performance together. We made the big step up to the U25 FEI Medium Tour early in 2024, and managed some fantastic placings. When Rico puts his best hoof forward, he's an absolute champion.

Riding incredible horses owned by my mentors is something I am very grateful for. I certainly don't underestimate the role of Vaughn Jefferis's mare Lanice van de Heffinck in our FMG Young Rider Series win for 2022–23. At just over 15.1 hands high, Lanice was not the biggest mare out there, but she was so competitive that she'd fly over jumps of 1.4 metres in some of the shows by sheer force of will. She is now owned by Grace Klava, who is doing some great jumping at the 1.3-, 1.35- and 1.4-metre heights.



Left: Ben and Poppy — the best friends are old friends. MARIA GOBBIE

Right: Ben and NPE Del Rico. TAKE THE MOMENT PHOTOGRAPHY

My mentors share the philosophy that happy horses come first. What matters most is the mental and physical health of your equine team members. On my 2023 trip to Europe to observe the methods of some of the top international equestrians, I heard that message again. Whether it was British Olympic dressage rider Carl Hester or Swedish Olympian Peder Fredricson, the advice was the same: pay attention to detail where your horses are concerned; give them generous paddock time and grooming; keep your stables immaculate — don't ever think you are too important to muck out or to tack up. Maintaining relationships with the horses you produce and ride is key to how successful you are.

There are no tricks to achieving as highly as top riders like Carl and Peder. You just have to put the horses' welfare above all else and do the work without short cuts.

This European trip, my first overseas experience, was mind-blowing in many ways — for the quality of the competitive horsemanship and the scale of some of the equestrian establishments and venues. What I enjoyed most, though, was seeing how down-to-earth and committed to their horses' well-being these elite equestrians were in real life.

World Equestrian Games. Olympic Games. These are huge goals,





Ben riding Balou Barbados. GRACE KLAVA

but I need them to motivate me and keep me striving to improve. For now, I'm focusing on getting as much riding experience and ring-time as I can, as well as giving those things to the young horses on my team — particularly, the beautiful grey mare Celestial, and the young stallion Balou Barbados. I'd definitely like to campaign overseas because there is so much to pick up from riders and trainers abroad — and so much to bring home. I think that's what makes equestrian competition so fulfilling: you're always learning, always refining your skills, and if you work as a coach the new ideas and practices can be passed on to other riders.

Opposite above: Ben and Lanice van de Heffinck making it look easy. JULIA MURCH

Opposite below: Ben and Lanice winning at Woodhill Sands in the 2022 Veterinary Associates Auckland Show Jumping Championships. AMY CROSSAN

