

Equestrian team faces hurdle in world games

by Laura Wallace



PHOTO: FABIO LAPA FROM ACTIONSHOTS

The New Zealand Equestrian Federation is sending a team of horses and riders to the World Equestrian Games in Aachen, Germany, this year, but the chances of winning medals in eventing are looking slim.

Some riders say the expected struggle is due to a need to improve the breeding of sport horses, while breeders say it's in the production and education of the horse.

Increasingly, eventers in Europe, America and Australia are turning to 'cross-bred' horses, mixing the tried and true thoroughbred with the heavier warmblood type. This cross gives the athleticism and endurance of the thoroughbred, with the movement and temperament of the warmblood.

Gordon, the current New Zealand three-day eventing champion and leader of the Ideal Garages advanced level leaderboard, is a warmblood cross.

Sired by Seattle Lodge's warmblood stallion, Voltaire II, Gordon was born to a thoroughbred mare. Although not yet qualified for this year's games, Gordon is an example of a highly successful crossbred sport horse.

Nicoli Fife, a former New Zealand selector, has ridden at world championship level and runs Charlton Stud in Putaruru. She breeds from her warmblood cross stallion, Charlton Javelin, himself a crossbred sporthorse.

"He is the stallion that will breed the modern sporthorse," says Fife.

"All his offspring are showing excellent movement, an athletic jumping style and a good gallop."

While Fife and other sport horse breeders that use warmbloods are confident that the crossbred sport horse is the way of the future, others are not so sure.

Mamaku Stud, in Masterton, most famous for producing Mark Todd's fabulous pint-sized eventer, Charisma, had produced thoroughbred sport horses for many years.

Their thoroughbred stallions, Silent Hunter (now deceased) and Exemplar, have produced many top level eventers.

"When correctly produced, these horses can boogie with the best of them," says Gay Meyer, owner of Mamaku. "In the end, the good breeding comes through."

Riders are divided on the matter. Some say that warmbloods are the only way, while others are stoic supporters of the "Kiwi thoroughbred".

"I don't think the problem is in the breeding," says Nick Brooks, who competes on a thoroughbred gelding, Groove Armada, and a warmblood cross, Voulez-Vous.

"I don't think many riders here are equipped to deal with the type of thoroughbred that can succeed.

"There are quality thoroughbreds out there, but not enough quality riders to produce them," he says.

The current short list for the world games includes six combinations. Four of the six combinations are thoroughbred horses, bred and produced by New Zealand riders.

Although New Zealand fields the most experienced team in terms of riders, the horses are nowhere near as accomplished as their competition.

The equestrian federation is spending up to \$350,000 sending the team to the world games, which has to be raised by the equestrian community of New Zealand.

For years, eventing has brought glory to equestrian sport in New Zealand, and kept eventing in the public eye.

However, since the change in breeding, eventers have suffered a lack of media publicity and public support.

The riders agree on one thing. New Zealand has to change and move with the times, or risk extinction as a serious medal-winning country.

LEAP OF FAITH: Bryce Newman with Sanskrit, a thoroughbred sport horse from Mamaku Stud.