



ACROSS THE NULLABOR AND BACK AGAIN – ALL IN THE NAME OF DRESSAGE

By Suzy Jarratt

Throw the racquets in a suitcase, toss the clubs in the boot, tie the surfboard to the roof rack and shove the boots in a bag. For most sportspeople to go from one competition to another it is a simple exercise.

But not for an equestrian – taking a horse to an event can be complicated and stressful even if it is close by.

When the venue is more than 4,000 kilometres away on the other side of Australia it becomes a manoeuvre of epic proportions.

Just ask Deon Stokes who recently arrived from Western Australia in his six-horse truck to compete at the forthcoming Saddleworld Australian Dressage Championships.

Obviously he is a glutton for punishment, this is his fourth trip across the Nullarbor.

Based in Armadale, on the south eastern edge of Perth, he grew up in Chapman Valley in the midwest of W.A. As a child he rode the farm's ponies, chased sheep, galloped along riverbanks and jumped whatever was in the way. He did his first competition when he was 18 and over the years has developed into a successful eventer.

“That first eventing competition wasn't my best,” admitted Deon, who will be 32 in November. “I came last in the dressage phase and in the cross-country was eliminated at the water. It was a nightmare from start to finish. I didn't have all the proper gear and was running late for everything, but something must have made me enjoy it because I'm still doing it.”

And he has become a skilled, successful dressage rider which, of course, is why he is in Sydney.

He could have chosen a life less horsey after gaining a Bachelor of Environmental Science with Honours. He spent a year working as a NRMO (Natural Resource Management Officer) out of Geraldton but this didn't help him improve his riding.

“I loved it but I was based on a farm away from competitions and coaches. I was left with two choices - 'give up the idea of elite riding and focus on a *normal* career' or 'give up your job and give riding a real go'.” Deon did the latter and today Stokes Sporthorses are proving to be winners in two equestrian disciplines – three-day-eventing and dressage.

The journey to the Dressage Nationals from Perth took him over four days.

“We decided to take a little more time than normal,” he said. “Before leaving there's a lot of preparation to be made. We have to ensure that the horses we leave behind remain in work and that the standard of care remains the same.

“Before the journey we work out how long we'll drive each day and where the horses will stay - some of the facilities in the middle of Australia leave a bit to be desired. You have to ensure the vehicle's in good condition and you've plenty of water for your horses as fresh water is limited.”

About a week before leaving Deon did ask himself whether it was such a good idea to be spending days on the road driving across a long, flat, treeless plain with a bunch of horses.

“I was running around trying to sort out everything and I was under prepared. I’d broken my ankle two months before and consequently missed competing at several lead up shows.

“But I’m here and I am ready.”

At this show in 2012 he took out championships and honours in various classes – he hopes to do well this year, as do his fellow Western Australians who decided to make the 8,000 kilometre round trip.

“We’ve a large contingent of riders coming to the east with some making the journey for the first time, it’ll be good to see so many people from home.”

And after the Dressage Nationals he will compete in South Australia with two eventing horses which have come with him across the Nullarbor.

“Adelaide International Horse Trials is about two weeks after the Nationals. I’ve wanted to combine the two events in a trip for a long time but logistically it’s very hard. Someone has to look after the eventers while I’m at SIEC, and then someone has to look after the dressage horses while I’m in Adelaide.

“But I’ve a very good support team and we’ll sort out each obstacle as we come to it.”

Others joining NSW and Western Australian competitors at the Championships are dressage riders from Tasmania, Queensland, South Australia, the ACT and New Zealand – plus some very important people from three different parts of the world. These are the international judges who will be flying in to join the 27 other judges assembling for this event.

Orsolya Hillier from Hungary, Natalie Lamping from Ocala, Florida and Susanne Baarup from Denmark will be arriving just before the event begins on October 22.

The SIEC venue is a world class facility which hosted the 2000 Olympics equestrian events. It is situated in Saxony Road, Horsley Park and is approximately 45 kilometres from the Sydney CBD. Events will be taking place on both outdoor and indoor arenas, all levels will be featured as well as freestyle events to music.

For more information about the Saddleworld Australian Dressage Championships go to www.dressagensw.com.au

To enjoy the event in style the *Top Spot Marquee* is the place to be.

Tickets are still available for the special Saturday evening dinner.

General enquiries: **Toni Venhaus 0418 686 781**

Hospitality: **Gail Benson 02 4572 3905**

