

# Aussie rules

Australian event rider Paul Tapner talks to Nicky Moffatt about the highs and lows of his journey to the top of his sport ▶

Photography: Jon Stroud. Thanks to Gatehouse Hats for setting up this interview. Visit: [www.gatehouserange.co.uk](http://www.gatehouserange.co.uk)

## Interview Paul Tapner

Sitting chatting to eventer Paul Tapner inside his lorry that seems bigger – and definitely more luxurious – than my house, I immediately know he's going to be an easy man to interview.

The laid-back Australian hands me a coffee before casting his mind back to the late seventies, when he was a child growing up near Sydney.

I imagine a young lad being brought up on a farm, surrounded by ponies he could take his pick from. But this couldn't be further from the truth for 'Taperz', as he's affectionately known on the circuit.

Born in Middle Harbour in the Northern Beaches area of Sydney, Paul's parents weren't horsey and there weren't many equines around. But Paul was obsessed with these wonderful animals from an early age.

"Mum grew up on a dairy farm and I have two aunts who were horsey, but I was never around horses so I have no idea why I developed such a passion for them," he says.

"As soon as I could speak, horses were all I talked about. I remember drawing lots of pictures of them at nursery school."

Aged seven, Paul's parents finally gave in to his pleas and took him to the nearest riding school.

"Every Saturday I would head off for my hour-long lessons," he recalls. "I loved them and it all snowballed from there."

"Two years later, my parents paid to hire a pony for me. Later, I got one on loan and joined the Pony Club."

Each one of Paul's horses has their own training programme



"I was lucky because my parents were really supportive and never tried to stop me doing it."

### Taking care of business

When Paul's parents finally bought him his first horse, which he describes as "totally unsuitable", he was encouraged to adopt a business like approach right from the start.

"Mum and dad made it clear the horses would have to be trained and sold on to make money, in order to fund the next one," he says.

"It was a good lesson to learn at such an early age and that's why I have a strong business head to this day."

"I was fortunate because the area I rode in had several talented riders, and we all took it seriously. I went to Pony Club with the likes of eventer Shane Rose and showjumper Edwina Alexandra."

"We had access to many good trainers and in 1988 Peter Taylor, who was my coach at the time, told me I had talent."

"Peter decided to take a year off competing and offered to lend me his top horse Look Sharp. I jumped at the chance and was soon riding this amazing horse in Pony Club team competitions."

"It was such a fantastic opportunity for me. I got a real taste of eventing and people started to recognise me," the rider remembers.

"Because I was naive, I didn't feel the pressure of riding a horse of that calibre."

### Fitting it all in

Paul's parents realised that his horse habit was more than a habit, and was going to continue. They moved out of the city to a more horsey area, so Paul could follow his dreams.

In 1993, he rode in his first Advanced event on Advena By Request, a horse he produced himself.

"That year we won the Pony Club Under 25s Club, Zone, State and National Championships," says Paul. "It was a memorable one, for sure."

"It was hard fitting in all the training, though, because I was also doing a full-time agricultural science degree."

"I would get up, muck out up to 17 horses, go to university until midday, clip horses for money during my lunch break, return to university for the afternoon, teach a few lessons on the way home and ride my horses in the evening." ▶

Paul has high hopes for his new horse Prince Mayo





"I'm not one to quit at things"

## 5 things Paul could not live without

**1 Gatehouse RXC1 Skull cap:** "Safety is everything to me and I believe this hat is the safest design on the market."

**2 Wow Saddles:** "Wow have made me my own red 'go faster' saddles, which are fully adjustable for both horse and rider."

**3 Fowler UK Industrial Washing Machine:** "When you compete four days a week and have more than 20 horses in work, you need a washing machine that's up to the job."

**4 FMBs Therapy Systems Magnetic Rug:** "These rugs go on all the horses before they compete to stimulate the muscles, and help them recover after."

**5 Premier Equine Air Teque Sports Boots:** "I believe these boots provide the ultimate protection from strike and strain injuries."



Even Paul's saddles are in his trademark red

## "Often, I'd be up until midnight finishing off university assignments and then at weekends I went out competing"

"Often, I'd be up until midnight finishing off university assignments and then at weekends I went out competing."

When asked whether he ever considered giving it all up and leading a more 'normal' lifestyle, Paul is adamant he never did.

"I'm not one to quit at things," he states. "I was friends with a group of athletes at university, so we were all focused."

"However, we would meet up every second Thursday night and party until the early hours – after I'd finished riding my horses, of course!"

### Time for a change

After university, Paul started a fencing business, alongside running his string of 10 horses – nine of which he owned.

"The business became quite a success," he says. "But all I wanted to do was ride, so in 1999 I sold it on to take an opportunity I'd been offered in the UK."

"I was given a five-month contract working for the Scott family in Cirencester, Gloucestershire."

"I brought two of my own horses to England with me and was also riding quite a few of theirs."

"When my contract was up, I sold my two and moved back to Australia, only to be invited back to the UK in 2000 to ride a horse called High Point at Bramham Horse Trials."

Impressively, Paul won Bramham that year and he eventually moved to the UK permanently.

"I moved around a lot at first, working for different owners, but when I met Georgina, my wife, I settled in Wiltshire."

### Family matters

Paul is clearly a devoted husband. He speaks highly of his wife, who also events, in between managing the family business, liaising with owners and sorting out Paul's entries.

"Georgina is incredible," he says. "I often wonder how she juggles everything."

"Not only does she run the yard, but she's a full-time mother to our two children – Joshua [aged 11] and Madison [aged eight] – who are also keen riders."

"Joshua found an old Australian Stock Saddle I had in the attic, so he's busy experimenting with that at the moment."

"He's a talented rider, but not passionate about it – he'd rather be driving tractors on the farm."

"Madison is a typical, pony-mad girl and loves anything pink and 'blingy'. She goes to Pony Club and has recently become keen on vaulting."



## Paul's horses

**KILRONAN** (Tom)  
**Vital statistics:** A 14-year-old, 16.2hh, four-star level Irish-bred gelding, who is owned by Fred and Penny Barker.  
**Paul says:** "Tom is a worrier, but he now trusts me 100 per cent in everything he does. Last year he was fourth at Badminton and was my World Equestrian Games ride."



**INDIAN MILL** (Monkee)  
**Vital statistics:** A 10-year-old, 16.2hh Thoroughbred gelding, owned by Colm and Sally McGinn.  
**Paul says:** "Monkee certainly lives up to his stable name and at the start of the season he's like riding a squeaky toy! However, he's very trainable and flashy and is getting better all the time."



**PRINCE MAYO** (Prince)  
**Vital statistics:** A 10-year-old, 16.2hh Irish Sports Horse gelding, owned by Fred and Penny Barker.  
**Paul says:** "Prince is new to our team. He can be quite boisterous, but we have high hopes for him. This year he will compete at three-star level."



**VANIR KAMIRA** (Tilly)  
**Vital statistics:** A 10-year-old, 16.2hh mare, owned by Trevor and Stephanie Dickens.  
**Paul says:** "Tilly is a brave mare and can be feisty. We are hoping she will be competitive at both three- and four-star level this year."



**BONZA KING OF ROGUES** (King)  
**Vital statistics:** A 12-year-old, 16.3hh gelding, owned by Angela Scott and Jenny Waaler.  
**Paul says:** "King is a real gentleman. We plan on moving him up to three-star level this season."



Paul believes the key ingredient to success is a positive outlook

The family home is Wickstead Farm Equestrian Centre, near Swindon, which houses between 85 and 100 horses at a time.

As well as a livery yard it is a riding school and a Riding for the Disabled centre.

"We have a mixture of liversies, from DIYs to hunting and full," says Paul. "My brother-in-law runs his farriery business from here, too."

At the end of last year, the centre had a new outdoor school installed, which leads onto a cross-country area with a variety of fences.

"It's a great set-up and we have everything from corners and skinnies to banks and ditches," says Paul. "It would be even better if it was ever free for me to ride around it!"

### Winning ways

In 2010, Paul set off to Badminton Horse Trials with two rides – Stormhill Michael (Mike) and Inonothing (Mannie). He admits they were both on exceptional form, but he was expecting most from Mike.

"I rode Mike first and after our dressage, I was really disappointed," Paul remembers. "He didn't get the score he needed and we were out of contention for a win."

"I confided in my good friend Leonard Goerens, a French rider, who told me to snap out of my depression and concentrate on Mannie."

With a dressage score of 44.9, Paul jumped clear cross-country, leaving him with a fence in hand going into the final showjumping phase.

Tapner jumped clear to win his first Badminton title. So, what was it like, to win the big one?

"There's a 24-hour period of pressure when you ride at any major event," he says. "From the start of the cross-country to the end of the showjumping, you really feel the stress."

"The first moment of elation is at the end of the cross-country. If you ever see photos of me coming over the finish line, you will see the feeling of winning and elation on my face."

"The pressure mounts again as you prepare for the showjumping. When you cross the finish line of the showjumping, it's a massive relief that you've achieved the win you expected after finishing the cross-country course."

Paul later found out his friend Leonard had put money on him to win Badminton with Mannie.

"No wonder he told me to snap out of it and concentrate on my other ride," jokes the eventer, who also finished tenth that year with Mike.

### Positive thinking

Like most top riders, Paul believes it is the small attention to detail that makes a difference. One of the key ingredients to being successful, he says, is having a positive outlook on all you do.

## 5 things you didn't know about Paul

- 1 Paul is half Italian, from his mother's side of the family.
- 2 During the eventing season, he lives off Peanut M&Ms and Coca Cola.
- 3 His favourite meal is spaghetti bolognese – well, he is Italian!
- 4 At Zara Phillips' wedding, Paul met and chatted with the Queen. "It was funny because fellow event rider Francis Whittington had nipped off somewhere and missed out on meeting her. I still tease him about it to this day."
- 5 The rider's stunning red lorry is affectionately known as Ruby.

"The techniques I use have been taught to me by professional sports psychologists."

Each horse's performance is just as important and Paul adapts their training to suit each one.

"The horse has to be performing at its best, and you have to do everything you can to make sure that happens," he says.

With two horses serious contenders for this year's Badminton Horse Trials, he's certainly one to watch out for.

"You can't really miss us," jokes the rider, who, along with the rest of Team Tapner, is always kitted out in his trademark red clothing. ■



'Taperz' has competed at the biggest events in the world

**"If you ever see photos of me coming over the cross-country finish line, you will see the feeling of winning and elation on my face"**

"Positive affirmations are a way of life for me," he says. "If I'm riding a movement such as shoulder-in, and it's worthy of a seven out of 10, I want to know what I need to do to get my mark up to an eight."

"When I am teaching others, I wouldn't say 'don't use so much right rein'. Instead, I would say 'soften your right rein'. I believe the way you word things should always be positive."

Paul doesn't suffer from nerves, but says he has to get his awareness and alertness levels right in order to perform at his best.

"If they're too low – if I am feeling too laidback before an event – I have to psyche myself up a bit, so my reactions will be quicker."

"On the other hand, sometimes I can be too psyched up before the showjumping, so I have to lower my awareness and alertness levels."



Paul's yard is home to between 85 and 100 horses at a time