



# Bill Johnson – living legend of SA showjumping

by Theresa Odendaal

**Gonda Beatrix, Anneli and Errol Wucherpfennig, George and Janie Myburgh, Tony Lewis, Mickey Louw, the late Philip Smith and last but not least – Bill Johnson. These are but a few names ringing with nostalgia, names from the golden era of South African showjumping, names that were as well-known to the non-riding public as to the riding public in years gone by. They were heroes, icons, flamboyant, larger-than-life characters and belong to an era that has gone and will never be again. Or do they?**

Yes, most of those much loved riders from that era have hung up their boots and don't actively compete anymore, but not Bill Johnson, who at age 70, is still active in the saddle and loving it.

SA Horseman visited Bill at his magnificent stable yard in Kyalami, north of Johannesburg, to find out a little more about this remarkable horseman.

On first meeting Bill, from his firm handshake to his twinkling eyes, one is struck by his warmth and all-encompassing enthusiasm. This is a man who is doing exactly what he wants to, how he wants to. He is a man driven, obsessed with life. Asked if he will ever retire, Bill says an emphatic no – people who retire die. He truly loves what he does and to him it is not a job, it is a lifestyle. It is what he always wanted to do. Like a very prosperous client once said to him, "I am rich, but you are wealthy."

Something else that strikes one instantly upon meeting him, is Bill's absolute and burning love of people. This comes across in the way he talks about his teaching career. He calculates that during his lifetime he has taught for more than 120 000 hours – this has to translate into hundreds, if not thousands of riders that have

passed through his hands – more than most other trainers can claim. This is not limited only to this country, but he also frequently presents riding clinics in the USA. Bill's philosophy about teaching is simple: explanation, demonstration and imitation. Never ask anyone to do something that you cannot do yourself.

However, to him teaching is much more than just training someone to ride a horse over a fence. It is teaching people life skills, such as making decisions, handling disappointment, determination and enthusiasm. It has also been Bill's obsession throughout his career to create and uphold a standard of excellence and to instil this within all those he comes into contact with. To this end, he also gives motivational lectures in the corporate world.

## Pass

Cape Town born and bred, Bill was always passionate about horses. At a young age, he and his twin brother went to the UK and Ireland to work with horses and gain some valuable riding experience. That was also where Bill first became a professional rider.



Bill Johnson with some of his students



Bill Johnson committing over a fence

Back home, during the late fifties, the brothers decided to make their living buying and selling horses. Johannesburg was where horses were fetching huge sums – so they followed the money. What was initially intended to be a ten-day visit, turned into a permanent move for Bill, when he was offered the job of running the stables at Inanda Country Club. This was only the beginning though, and three years later Bill got his break. Bill Clifford lent him R500 to start his own establishment and he promptly rented the Bryanston Country Club and the first Bryanston Equitation Centre was born – incidentally, he was the first to use this now popular term. This saw the launch of Bill's career.

In those early days the competition was fierce. All the riders on the circuit were equally determined to win. Bill describes himself as an "ordinary rider with average ability, who had to work so much harder to compete successfully with some of the celebrated riders of that time". No expensive and fancy horses for Bill either, everything he rode, he picked up cheap and brought on himself. But the hard work paid off. Bill won championship after championship. Anneli Wucherpfennig was once noted as saying that Bill Johnson, on his day, was the fastest rider imaginable and that it took some serious riding to beat him.

Reminiscing about those golden days of

South African showjumping, Bill says that it was a lot more fun and personality-orientated. People had "balls" (Bill's term) and rode on "feel" then. Riders did not think about things too much, they just got on with the job. The number of riders was also much smaller, so that there was a lot more personal contact and people cared about one another. If one person won a Grand Prix, the others would be truly pleased for him. There was a real camaraderie between the riders that is no longer there.

In those days of course, South Africa was banned from the Olympics, but Bill says that it never really bothered anyone. In his case, at any rate, it was a moot point, as at the time, he was the only licensed "professional rider" in the country and one had to be an "amateur" to compete in the Olympics.

Today things are different. Showjumping has become extremely technical and the numbers too great. There is also a plethora of absurdly expensive imported horses that has changed the face of the sport. Bill feels that in those days experience and ability were created and mined, but today it is often bought.

## Highlights

Bill did not only excel in showjumping. Asked to name one of the highlights of his career, he surprisingly recalled how once at an indoor

show in the seventies, he had won the dressage, the showjumping and the showing championships – all at the same show. Not many of even the greatest riders of any era can claim this, proving Bill's holistic approach to riding.

In the training of horses, Bill, whose riding is strongly influenced by his dressage background, does not believe in taking shortcuts. There are certain rules for developing a horse's athletic ability and that can and will never change. He believes in very few artificial aids and is dead against any cruel and abusive training methods and riders using any foreign substances to boost their performance. For such a driven, motivated and enthusiastic person as Bill, there is simply no substitute for hard work.

"Like a very prosperous client once said to him, 'I am rich, but you are wealthy' "

Bill acknowledges that any rider is only as good as his horse allows him to be. Talking about some of the greatest horses from his past, Bill repeatedly mentions Spun Gold. Not a big horse (under 16 hh), he had "curious ability and speed", in spite of some conformation faults. He also had a mind of his own, and "sometimes he would break your heart, and sometimes he would break the hearts of his competitors." He recalls how he had ridden two of the fastest jump-offs ever on this horse, once galloping flat-out into a 1,6 m vertical. In a power-jump, he once jumped a fence of 2,21 m (7,3 ft).

Having achieved all kinds of dizzying heights in his career, Bill has one more dream – to build an indoor show-venue of international standard to host top-level events – setting another standard of excellence. As long as there are mountains to climb and standards to raise ...

Yes, Bill Johnson has definitely left deep footprints on the face of South African showjumping. His contribution in all aspects of the sport must be recognised and he should be cherished for adding warmth, character and personality to what is essentially a selfish sport. Flamboyant, charismatic and very much larger-than-life, Bill Johnson will certainly be remembered for the incredibly high standards he introduced to the sport, his guts, dedication and ultimately his burning passion. SAH



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