



During the mid-1950's, the team of David Stubbs and Willie Waterloo dominated show jumping in South Africa. They also went on a very successful tour through the UK

The epitome of a horseman

by Theresa Odendaal

David Stubbs has been described as one of South Africa's most accomplished and versatile horsemen. For the last 60 years, he has featured most prominently on the South African equestrian horizon, wearing many different hats – including that of rider, competitor, trainer, judge, selector and president of Sanef.

In May 1995 he was presented with a gilt-framed mirror by Sanef, on which was inscribed: *“Presented to David Stubbs, the epitome of a horseman, by Sanef and the Provinces, for the enormous contribution he has made to all aspects of equestrian sport”*.

But what is it that makes such a great horseman? Is it riding ability and being rated among the top of South Africa's riders of all time? Is it a love of all sports equestrian? Is it a love and knowledge of horses? Or is it all of those combined with a kindness and unpretentiousness that is evident in all levels of life?

A man and his horse

When I first met David Stubbs in 2006, I was a little daunted at the prospect of meeting such a great legend, but what I found was a gentle, humble and unassuming man, who has always prided himself on the fact that he has been equally known and loved by riders from all disciplines, at all levels. Every rider, whether he rides H-grade or prelim dressage, is equally important to him. They are the majority who make up the sport and are sometimes even more enthusiastic about their horses than many of those at the top, he says.

David was awarded his Springbok colours for show jumping and captained the South African team on several occasions. In the mid 1950's, he represented South Africa abroad on his own horse, Willie Waterloo. The pair won the British National Championship at Swindon and qualified to compete in the King George V Cup. David says that it was probably the highlight of his career. He can still

remember the emotions that surged through him when he rode Willie through the streets of Swindon afterwards – looking for a hotel that would take him – Willie, that is. In fact, when asked about his favourite horse, David immediately names Willie Waterloo – for his honesty.

Willie was a smallish bay (about 15,2 hh) of rather questionable breeding, who died at the age of 12. Yes, there were other great horses, says David, but being a horse dealer, most of them he sold on and some, such as Tango (renamed Captain Blye) and Wendover who went on to compete in the Olympics – but to him there was only one Willie Waterloo.

A show jumping career

David has an innate ability to laugh at himself. He recalls how his initiation in the show jumping arena was a less than glamorous affair. As a young man, having come from a farming background and with no formal riding tuition, he used to longingly watch the greats of the time at the Rand Show and yearn to compete with and against them. His chance came a few years later.

Dressed in a brown pork pie felt hat, ordinary brown sports coat, second-hand baggy cavalry breeches, a pair of his father's old polo boots, and with his old-fashioned chair-seat style (which often left him behind over the jumps), he entered the arena for his first shot at greatness on a borrowed horse. At the end of the round, David had scored a fall, a refusal and had flattened half the course! This, David says, was definitely the lowlight of his career!

However, a year later David returned to the same venue and won the grand prix – and the rest is history.

David has always harboured a great love of polo, but says that sadly, the sport is much changed. Money talks and only the very rich can afford to stay in the game, as one needs a minimum of four horses to compete and a lot of time to train.

Training for everything

David is very vocal about the use of any harsh, cruel or brutal training methods across all disciplines and is greatly saddened that such



David Stubbs

practices take place at all. He believes that it is totally unnecessary and so much more can be achieved by kindness.

David comes from a long line of dedicated horsemen and was literally born in the saddle. In his autobiographical book, *In Tom's footsteps*, David recalls one of his earliest memories of sitting on a pink cushion in front of his father, who was mounted on a polo pony. Of course it did not take the young David long to find himself seated on his very own pony.

David did not receive any formal riding instruction, but learned as he went along, competing in local gymkhanas, later learning to play polo alongside his father and generally tried his hand at almost every available sport that had something to do with horses. In the book, David says: "If you were anything of a horseman in those days, you dabbled in every available discipline and what fun it was. There was no such thing as specialisation." Perhaps that is why, during his 35 years on the Sanef committee and two years as its president, he made a concerted effort never to single out and favour any specific discipline, respecting every discipline for what it is.

Could this be something else that contributes to make David such a great horseman – this utter respect, understanding and acknowledgement of all disciplines, their riders and their methods? How often do we not hear a rider from one specific discipline

being intolerant and critical of someone from another discipline, without any knowledge of or having had any experience in that discipline or understanding its aims?

David is also proud of the fact that even though he was an English judge and member of Sanef, he was often invited, “even in those days”, by the platteland communities to judge at their shows. He is also delighted with the fact that over the years, the quality of the horses and riding in these outlying country districts, has improved far beyond expectation. Perhaps his kind words as a judge were just a little responsible for this – encouraging, rather than criticising!

Ride with respect

When asked if there is anything he would like to say to all South African riders, he looked serious for a moment and then continued: “Never forget that riding competitively is a sport first and foremost – in other words, don’t take it too seriously. Maintain respect for all disciplines and always remember that it is the horse that is giving us pleasure. Always treat him with respect and never abuse. Win or

lose, it is the interaction with the horse that counts. If you don’t love horses, don’t ride – go and bash around on a motorbike!”

South Africa needs many more horsemen of the calibre of David Stubbs to bring a level of tolerance, kindness and above all, respect to the small community that is combined by one thing and one thing only – horses.

Of course, nobody involved with horses in South Africa can hear the name David Stubbs, without immediately thinking of the other half of that duo – his wife Charlotte. *SA Horseman* aims to honour both of these stalwarts of the South African equestrian landscape, and we will feature an article on Charlotte later in the year. She is as much an icon in the South African riding scene and as much of a contributor as her husband.

If you want to find out more about the exciting life and times of this horseman, you can order a copy of David’s book, *In Tom’s footsteps* by e-mailing carol@petstravel.co.za. **SAH**

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