



Paul Tapner at home with daughter Madison, Badminton winner Inonothing (left) and Stormhill Michael, who was 10th at the event

A restless brain

Paul Tapner's Badminton win two weeks ago was the result of single-minded dedication and pure hard work — and yet the Australian is also a multi-tasking father, husband and businessman. He talks to Catherine Austen

GEORGINA TAPNER is still reeling from her husband Paul's Badminton success. But while she waits for it "to sink in", her husband has no such problems. He knows exactly what he's done, understands the magnitude of his achievement and can tell you exactly how much work it took to get there.

Paul, 34, should inspire everyone who thinks that you've got to a) be rich or b) be from a seriously horsey background — preferably both — to succeed in eventing. He grew up in a suburb of Sydney, Australia, the son of totally unhorsey parents.

"As soon as I could talk, I wanted to ride horses," he says, sitting in his kitchen, still wearing what he calls his "bling" — four rings and a slim gold necklace, donned for a Black Eyed Peas concert the night before.

The nearest riding school was an hour's drive away, but he took lessons there for two years from the age of seven — the youngest at which

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Jenny Waaler, owner of Inonothing, on Paul

they would take him — before hiring ponies to go to the Pony Club. Then ponies were leased and, eventually, a horse bought.

Paul's parents, George and Jean, threw themselves wholeheartedly into supporting him and eventually moved out of the city to make his riding easier. They were willing to

support his equestrian ambitions, but not at the cost of his education.

"I wanted to leave school after my School Certificate [GCSE equivalent] and become an electrician, but my parents said that if I wasn't going to stay on at school, I'd have to pay for my horses. I did the maths," he says with a grin.

The same thing happened at the next level, and Paul ended up doing a degree in Applied Agricultural Science, and even did half of a Diploma in Education before finally dropping out to concentrate on horses.

A rider and shrewd businessman

HIS education is apparent when you speak to him. He talks articulately and intelligently at great speed; his quick brain darts from topic to topic. It is a brain that needs occupation; he confesses to being a workaholic and an insomniac. While at university he started Advena Equestrian Centre — from *advenire*, to arrive.

"It's a rough Aussie translation of the Latin word for newcomer," says Paul.



A marketing dream:
Paul's colours might
be described as
'Mitsubishi red'

As well as the equestrian centre, he developed a fencing business that eventually employed more than 20 people and was contracted to erect the outside fencing for the Sydney Olympics, and a portable stabling company.

He came over to Britain in 1999 to ride for Edward and Angela Scott at Ampney Park near Cirencester on a six-month contract, having met them when they were based in Australia. He won his first event – a pre-novice at Pontispool – and his season progressed successfully from there.

The following year, his Australian businesses were doing well so he took another "10-week holiday" and won Bramham, as a completely unknown "foreigner", on Highpoint. It was the first time he had even completed a three-star.

"It took off from there," he says.

An initial attraction of eventing in the UK was that he didn't have side-interests to pay for his competing – people paid him to ride their horses – but his restless brain and natural flair for business have led him to set up a hydrotherapy spa for horses over the winter, and he is starting a feed company.

Funny how, now his mind is less concentrated solely on riding horses than it has been for a decade, he suddenly becomes invincible as a competitor.

Paul's form at one-day events has long been good, and he has leapfrogged up the British rider rankings in recent years – 53rd in 2005, 33rd in 2006, 13th in 2007, 11th in 2008 and seventh in 2009. But Badminton 2010 was only his second three-day event win, despite a generous clutch of top-10 placings.

Now, although his Aussie accent remains intact, Paul has no plans to go back to Australia – he married Georgina Mace in 2005, and they have two children, Joshua, five, and Madison, three. His Australian businesses have been wound up, and the Tapners are based at Georgina's mother Vicki's Wickstead Farm Equestrian Centre, near Swindon.

With 500 acres to play with, there's plenty of space at Wickstead – but it's a farm which works for its money. The most noticeable feature is the biggest muckheap you have ever seen – the result of all 80 boxes being full.

Not all the occupants are eventers, obviously – Paul has 20-25 of those – but Georgina's

sister Hannah has her yard here, there's a riding school and Pony Club centre branch, Riding for the Disabled sessions, liverys, broodmares and youngstock.

It's another source of inspiration. Horses don't have to live in marble palaces to be Badminton winners, and Paul's squad seem to thrive on the endless comings and goings at Wickstead.

Flying the flag for Australia

PERHAPS the most significant result of Paul's Badminton triumph will be – barring disasters – a first cap for Australia this autumn at the World Equestrian Games.

"The culture of Australia is that you want to be the best at what you do, and that means you've got to represent your country. I've been representing Australia unofficially in the UK for 10 years. Now I want to do it officially, with that badge on my breast pocket," he says.

It would also mean a great deal to his parents, and Paul was delighted that in a post-Badminton letter of congratulation from the CEO of Equestrian Australia, Jean and George received plenty of credit.

The first time he put such pressure on himself to perform at Badminton well enough to grab a team slot was in 2008. A run-out a couple of fences from home on Inonothing put paid to that, and the BBC television cameras famously spotted Paul having a "McEnroe moment", throwing his hat to the ground in fury and frustration after his round.

"I got off the horse, patted him, walked calmly out of the arena and found somewhere I thought no one could see me," he says wryly. "But there was a television camera high up that caught me.

"It had been made very clear what I needed to achieve to get on the team, and there you go, my one shot at getting to the Hong Kong Olympics was totally blown."

Fitness of mind and body

THERE were no slip-ups this time. An utterly determined, coolly focused Paul jumped a double clear to win on Jenny Waaler's Inonothing. His confidence was conspicuous – you got the feeling that if he believed in his victory hard enough, it would happen.

He certainly believes mental fitness is one of his assets.

"Life's experiences have made me that way," he says. "The accident to my hand made me realise how you can overcome adversity." »

THE TOP TRIO

Inonothing
Basildon Bond-
Cassie
14yo dark bay
thoroughbred
gelding

Nickname: Mannie

Owned by: Jenny and Claus
Waaler

1473 British Eventing points
Best results: 1st Badminton
CCI**** 2010, 6th Burghley
CCI**** 2009, 7th Luhmühlen
CCI**** 2009

In Paul's words: "A grumpy
old stresshead"



Stormhill
Michael

Stormhill Miller-
Sweet Sirenia (Al
Sirat)

11yo dark bay
thoroughbred gelding

Nickname: Mike

Owned by: Martin and Suzie
Belsham

471 British Eventing points
Best results: 1st Burnham
Market CIC*** 2010, 10th
Badminton CCI**** 2010

In Paul's words: "A gay pretty
boy"



Kilfinnie II

Tullibards
Shakespeare-
Tullibards
Nightstar
12yo dark bay

British sport horse gelding

Nickname: Scottie

Owned by: Sue White

467 British Eventing points
Best results: 15th Burghley
CCI**** 2010, 12th Boekelo
CCI*** 2008

In Paul's words: "Quiet,
reserved and full of confidence
– the reincarnation of me"





Paul Tapner launches his eventing career in Britain by winning Bramham in 2000 on Highpoint

He's referring to an incident that could have halted any nascent riding career in its tracks. He virtually cut his hand off falling through plate glass as a child — everything was severed that could have been. But it healed remarkably well and the doctors were somewhat annoyed when their prize experiment stopped doing the physio as soon as he could hold his hands in a riding position and close them round the reins. The visible legacy is a long white scar running across his wrist.

He also had access to sports psychology in Australia's junior and young rider system, and has kept a strong interest in it.

"I have an endless supply of self-help books, and now listen to them on my iPod as well. I recognise it as an important aspect of my game and have put a lot of focus and effort into it. I believe in an all-round, holistic approach. Jon Pitts [the personal trainer who works with the British team] has helped me with my personal fitness, core stability and flexibility this year. I looked at the holes in my mental game first, and then at where I could up my physical performance."

Paul's energy and drive belie his patience with horses.

"He just has a feel for horses, particularly difficult ones," says Jenny Waaler, who is still in a state of shock that the foal she paid £500 for has won Badminton. "He's good at getting inside horses' heads — it's uncanny. He's an old-fashioned horseman who gets into their brains."

Paul thinks the very top riders are those who can balance their horsemanship with competitiveness. Some are too competitive to the detriment of their horsemanship, while in reverse some lack the edge that pushes them to win.

"It's a personal theory I've developed," he says. "I've watched lots of other riders to find out why they're successful. You've got to know when to push hard and when not to."

Team Tapner

PAUL has achieved this balance to perfection, but refuses to take all the credit for it.

"It's not Paul Tapner, it's the Tapner Eventing Team," he insists. "It's been our philosophy to create a team atmosphere."

Georgina groomed for him at Badminton,

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Paul Tapner on using sports psychology to get to the top

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and knows she is a significant contributor to his success. When asked whether she, as a competitor herself, wishes it had been her receiving the trophy, she replies simply: "It felt like me."

The back-up squad, led by Zoe Wilkinson and Emily Drummond-Dunn, dressed in the ubiquitous red (see above), know how important their part is, and Paul and Georgina

SEEING RED

YOU can't miss Team Tapner at an event — they are the ones swathed in red. And no, it wasn't chosen to complement Paul's dark good looks.

He says: "In my Pony Club days, I represented Zone 23 at everything — mounted games, showjumping, eventing, dressage, you name it, I did it — and our colours were red and white. Being patriotic little Aussie kids we had loads of red and white kit.

"My cross-country colours were actually blue and white, but one day at an event I forgot my blue kit. As I had so much red stuff, I rode in that. Loads of people remarked afterwards how easy it was to spot me, so I stuck with it. It's as much a marketing tool as anything now. As I told an Australian interviewer earlier this year, with 15,000 British Eventing competitors, I've got to stand out somehow."

The red even extends to overreach boots.

Paul's wife Georgina adds: "We're sponsored by Premier Equine and they made them for us, but they didn't sell, so they stopped. I found one last pair in the attic and have been saving them specially for Badminton — they'll be kept for the special occasions now."

returned home to a rapturous welcome, banners flying and bottles clinking.

"We went to bed about midnight, exhausted, but the party went on until three or four," says Georgina.

They have been overwhelmed by texts, emails, phone calls and letters. But now Paul's intense focus switches to Luhmühlen and the third of his four-star trio, Kilfinnie II. The aim is to give the Australian selectors no choice but to take him to Kentucky.

Georgina tells a story about accompanying Paul home to Australia towards the beginning of their relationship. Still plastered on his bedroom door was a huge picture of Matt Ryan, who had inspired him as a child. What's the betting that Matt Ryan's daughter has a picture of Paul Tapner on her bedroom door as she's growing up? **H&H**



Team Tapner. Front row, left to right: Keana Marsh, Emily Drummond-Dunn, Georgina Tapner with Madison, Paul Tapner, Zoe Wilkinson and Tom Hayes. Back row, left to right: George Jupe, Josh Tapner and Claire Ludeks