

'I'm a highly motivated workaholic insomniac...'

... not to mention talented, gorgeous and disarmingly charming. Martha Terry spends the day with eventing's new superstar, Paul Tapner

Paul Tapner is making hula-hoop sandwiches. His daughter, Madison, three-and-a-half, has taken over today's photo-shoot. She's dancing for the cameras with her terrier, Farmer, and beaming broadly behind wisps of blond hair. She's the star, and her dad's just sandwich-maker. In truth, Paul looks relieved the cameras have diverted. This is the umpteenth shoot since his Badminton win nine days ago. "I've lost count of how many interviews I've done. I thought I was busy before Badminton – we work 12-hour days usually. But of all of a sudden there are these things like shoots, and interviews... It's great, I'm not complaining, but it's manic."

Not that Paul is any stranger to the camera. He has done plenty of catalogue modelling and is a very biddable muse – gamely hoisting poles over his shoulder or grinning down from a rusty tractor. But he insists he's not heading from the trot-up to the catwalk. "I've had numerous people trying to get me to do it, but I find it all a bit weird. I do enough riding round in circles trying to look pretty, so when I'm on the ground, I like to just be normal," says Paul. He wishes.

The early years

So, back to the pretty circles. Paul was once a city boy, born and raised in Sydney. His parents, George and Jean, weren't at all horsey, but it was clear from the moment their only child could express himself that he certainly was. As soon as he was old enough, they took him to riding lessons an hour's drive away – which gradually snowballed into hiring ponies, buying a pony, and finally starting up their own equestrian centre when their son was 13.

Five years later, the city boy won the club championship, zone championship, state championship and national championship – all in the same year on the same horse. "It was then that I realised I could keep

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Paul and Inonothera en route to their Badminton victory.

doing this as a profession," he says.

By 1999, Paul, aged 23, had arrived in England on a six-month contract with Edward and Angela Scott, friends

through the Pony Club in Australia. Despite hot-footing hemispheres for the next three years, England was increasingly becoming his strategic home. "The eventing scene is live and kicking in Australia, but I was amazed at the professionalism of the competitions here – it doesn't compare," says Paul, as his compatriots Andrew Hoy and Matt Ryan had done before him. "It's obvious why so many people base themselves here to be professional event riders."

The waiting game

In 2000, Paul made his first mark on the British record books by winning Bramham

CCI three-star on Highpoint. Who would have thought it would take an entire decade to land a second three-day win?

"Ten years between drinks and, yes, I was dry and parched," jokes Paul, who has won countless one-day titles. "I made it my goal last year to win any three-day at any level. It didn't happen but it made me more determined to do it this year. Thankfully the doors opened at Badminton and I jumped right in."

That waiting game pushed his driven nature to the extreme. Paul is extremely likeable in conversation, but you get the impression that he doesn't suffer fools gladly. Those friendly dimples mask a ruthless streak.

"I'm highly motivated, a workaholic and an insomniac," he says. "I don't like lazy people. When I was younger not many people could keep up with the pace I worked at, but I've learnt since, through employing people, that I can't always expect everyone to work my hours or

Making light work of the cross-country at Barbury Castle on board Tiger Flynne.



“If you want to get to where I am, you’ve got to catch up. If you just plod along, you aren’t going to get there”

my pace. But I say to them, ‘if they want to get to where I am, you’ve got to catch up’. If you just plod along, you aren’t going to get there.”

But did he ever worry that he wasn’t going to get there? How does an Aussie stay motivated for 10 years in this forsaken climate? “The weather is crap – I don’t like getting stuck here over winter, no man in their right mind would,” he half-jokes. “I have thought about giving up plenty of times – normally the day after a

competition. Even if you’ve won, you still have to go back to work, muck out an enormous amount of horses, ride an enormous amount of horses [around eight a day] and you feel a bit low and random thoughts go through your head. You realise winning doesn’t change your life. We call it the ‘Day-After-Competition Blues.’”

Paul is an upbeat guy, but with “a healthy respect for the fact that this is the most dangerous sport in the world”. Another dark moment was just after a

TIMELINE

- **1976**
Born in Sydney, Australia
- **1983**
First starts riding
- **1993**
Wins club, zone, state and national championships
- **1999**
Arrives in Britain and wins Bramham CCI three-star the following year
- **2005**
Marries Georgina Mace
- **2010**
Wins Badminton



PAUL ON...

Aussie rock

“Clayton [Fredericks] and I drove out to Sweden together and he had a heap of Australian stuff on his iPod that only he and I liked,” says Paul. “The grooms were like ‘what are these old Aussie fogies listening to?’ Now I’ve loaded up my iPod with Aussie rock and it helps me focus at events.”

Pin-ups

When Georgina first went to Paul’s home in Australia, she found a big poster of Matt Ryan – now a good friend – pinned to his door. “My room in Australia is still somewhat petrified in my teenage years,” admits Paul.

Learning to ride British

“I grew up just riding Thoroughbred ex-racehorses,” Paul says. “It was a learning curve when I first came here because I had to learn to ride warmbloods and Irish horses.”

A family man: Paul relaxes at home with daughter Madison, who is already a star for the camera. His dogs, Farmer (right) and Digger, are also adept at posing for photos.



his Gatehouse crash hat. He has a friend who was severely brain-damaged after falling without a hat – woe betide anyone who gets on a horse at the yard, even for two minutes, without one.

Landing the big one

This year, for his rivals at least, a big, big win seemed inevitable for Paul. He headed to Badminton on a scintillating run of form with both his runners, Inonothing (the winner) and Stormhill Michael (10th) and was touted as one of the favourites. Jumping his final showjumping round to seal his victory, Paul seemed utterly relaxed

– but the competition had started in a very different vein.

“I was nervous before Michael’s dressage because lots of people had indicated I was going to win and the pressure builds up,” he says. “I didn’t ride well, I made errors and I was annoyed with myself. My wife gave me a bollocking, my national coach gave me a bollocking and this convinced me that I couldn’t be nervous for the rest of the competition. So I mentally prepared myself to do the best each horse could do – those nerves had stopped me performing at my best.”

Instead, Paul and his wife Georgina tucked into a large roast dinner between

his cross-country rides – “it was beautiful, I went up and thanked the chef” – and took their minds off the nerves.

Inonothing – who goes by the name of Mannie, short for Manuel of *Fawly Towers* “I know nothing” fame – popped round Badminton’s vast track as if it were Pony Club. But his springy heels and perky ears contrast sharply with the Tappers’ assessment of him. His owner, Jenny Waaler, bought him for £500 as a foal, for her husband Claus to hunt – but he proved completely unsuitable.

“He had some fairly unique behavioural problems,” says Paul. “When he gets stressed he spins very quickly in very

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tight circles – and he was certainly doing plenty of that the day before his dressage at Badminton.”

For most of their first season together, Paul was uninspired. Then they won a Novice and the partnership was made. “From then on, he was easy, I knew how to handle him,” he says. “But he’s still a grumpy old stresshead.”

And what next, after achieving such a goal? No Day-After-Competition-Blues this time, save the hangover. Paul is now tilting at a second four-star trophy, Luhmuhlen – with the third of his top trio, Kilfinnie. After that, a summer campaign that will guarantee a first cap for Australia at the World Equestrian Games in September. In the meantime,

there are more sponsorship deals, interviews and modelling calls – besides a young family. How does he fit it all in?

“Georgina and I work together and spend huge amounts of time together – that’s the only way to do it,” says Paul. “We’re lucky that we’re able to work together and be a married couple, and do both happily.”

The pair met when Paul was Georgina’s instructor, and they now help each other with their riding. Georgina backed Inonothing, she grooms for Paul at events and is very involved in the business. But despite his wife’s sharp words at Badminton, Paul says his biggest spur is his son Joshua, six-and-a-half.

“I don’t have a pushy parent, I have a pushy son,” he laughs. “Josh cried when I won Badminton and he wants to know why I don’t always win.”

And while little Madison is lapping up the limelight that her father has no great interest in sharing, you sense that Paul is

itching to get back to what he really enjoys: “boys’ toys” with his son.

“Standing in front of a camera is not blokes’ stuff, nor is riding round in circles,” he says. “I want to be playing with tractors, drainage ditches and my welder – now that’s blokes’ stuff.”

PAUL’S TOP HORSES

Kilfinnie II

Known as Scottie, the 12-year-old gelding is by Tullibards Shakespeare out of Tullibards Nightstar. Owned by Sue White, he finished 15th at Burghley last year. Georgina says: “He’s Paul reincarnated – quiet, reserved but extremely confident deep down.”

Stormhill Michael

Paul’s other Badminton ride this year, finishing 10th, Michael won at Burnham Market earlier this year. He is an 11-year-old gelding owned by Suzie Belsham, by Stormhill Miller out of Sirenia. Paul says: “He’s a pretty boy like David Beckham.”

Inonothing

The Badminton star, 14-year-old Mannie is owned by Jenny Waaler. By Basildon Bond out of Cassie, he has a consistent eventing record, clocking up 1,472 points. Paul says: “He likes his own space, he’s a grumpy stresshead.”

Wickstead Didgeridoo

An eight-year-old stallion by Mayhill out of Glenwherry, owned by Penny and Fred Barker, and Georgina Tapner. Paul says: “He’s a ladies’ man. He’s small but he’s got big balls.”



In addition to riding and competing his event horses on the circuit with such success, Paul has also found the time to become a respected trainer and has a stream of loyal clients.



POINT TWO AIR JACKET

“It was pretty invaluable last year, I had more crashes than I’ve had in any season.”

MY MOBILE PHONE

“It’s my life.”

GATEHOUSE HS1

“No one here gets on a horse without a hat. Safety is very important to me and these are high-spec crash hats.”

WHAT'S IN YOUR TACK ROOM?

We asked Paul Tapner to show us the things he couldn't live without

PREMIER EQUINE

“They supply me with all my rugs and boots. I’ve been working with them for many years and their new range definitely gets my seal of approval.”