

# New pastime for the Penzas

**IT'S 3 O'CLOCK ON A SUNDAY MORNING, PITCH BLACK, FREEZING COLD AND MOST PEOPLE ARE STILL FAST ASLEEP – NOT MICHELLE AND JEFF PENZA**

WORDS: JULIEANNE HORSMAN

**B**efore the crack of dawn, Michelle and Jeff Penza are busy loading up their horse float for a trip to a showjumping competition in Canberra and they couldn't be happier.

"We're like little kids excitedly heading off to school camp," Michelle said.

"The days where we set off early, spend the whole day together at a horse event and come home late, exhausted but satisfied, are the best days," Jeff added.

Both have been around horses for most of their lives but have taken up competitive showjumping more recently.

Jeff, a veteran jockey with almost 2000 wins to his name, decided to give showjumping a crack four years ago "for something different."

He began schooling his off the track Thoroughbred, former Con Karakatsanis-trained gelding Stromaise, and sought lessons from Australian champion and renowned coach, Dave Cameron.

He then took on another retired racehorse, former Jan Bowen-trained gelding Fireball, and as the jumps grew, so too did Jeff's enthusiasm.

Michelle had initially adopted former Jason Coyle galloper, Sherzando, as a pleasure horse. The flashy black gelding had impressed Jeff with his lovely canter and quiet nature when he rode him in a race at Newcastle.

He was a breeze to retrain, and Michelle was content riding him around at home, but the pull of the coloured poles was too strong.

"Jeff had become really passionate about jumping and a young girl I was giving riding lessons to wanted to

get into it as well, so I thought I had better learn," Michelle said.

Michelle and Jeff joined Sydney Showjumping Club which isn't far from their home in the Hawkesbury region.

Guided by friends and talented equestrians, Kathy O'Hara and Elaine Robl, Jeff and Michelle began going to the training and competition days there. Next it was horse shows further afield.

Now the Penzas are a familiar and friendly sight on the circuit. It's a juggle with Jeff's jockeying commitments, but they make it work.

"We often go to shows in separate cars," Michelle said. "Jeff competes then heads off to the races and I bring the horses home in the float."

They target the Thoroughbred-specific classes when they are available. Sherzando jumps up to 90cm, Stromaise 1.10m and Fireball has no problems with 1.20m and beyond.

"The increasing sponsorship of Thoroughbred classes has made it more enticing to own one," Jeff said. "There's always rugs and prizemoney across a variety of classes.

"Those without Thoroughbreds are getting jealous!"

"We're happy if the horses jump clear rounds and we have a good day out," Michelle said. "There's a lot of satisfaction in being pleased with your own efforts. Blue ribbons are a bonus."

When pressed on who is the better rider, Jeff diplomatically declares he 'has the more naturally talented horses'.

"Michelle's a better stablehand, she puts in the hard yards," Jeff said. "I definitely brush my horses more."

Both agree Thoroughbreds are the ultimate equine athletes though and anyone who takes one off the track will reap the rewards.

"They're athletic and trainable with a great nature," Jeff said. "They're accustomed to travelling to the races, being walked around the parade ring, standing in the barriers, galloping flat out in front of screaming crowds. They've experienced it all.

"They're quick learners and agile, I love everything about them," Michelle added. "We have had different breeds of horses over the years and keep coming back to the Thoroughbreds."

The Penzas have recently added another off the track Thoroughbred to their jumping stable. Jeff rode Doug Gorrel-trained gelding Pheidippides in his final race and instantly liked him.

"He jumped out, bowed his head down and gave me such a nice ride, especially for a young horse," Jeff said.

"He had no talent as a racehorse, but I liked him and asked if we could have him once he retired. We got the call about two months ago and we couldn't be happier with him.

"He has a great attitude, is jumping well and has fitted in perfectly with our other horses. We've renamed him Bojack."

For now, Michelle and Jeff don't have any huge plans for their horses. They are simply looking forward to getting out and competing again.

"They are grateful to have their horses at home and couldn't imagine a life without them.

"The horses give us life," Michelle said. "They depend on you to care for them and that gives you worth. They bring a smile to my face every day." **RNSW**



*TOP: Jeff piloted Fireball to victory in two races and is now guiding him through his new career as a showjumper. Picture by Geosnapshot  
RIGHT: Couple goals: Jeff (on Stromaise) and Michelle (on Sherzando) enjoying a day out at the Canberra Showjumping Cup. Picture by Rushe Photography. BELOW: Michelle Penza and Stromaise in full flight at Sydney Showjumping Club. Picture by Geosnapshot*

