

# Hugh Bowman, horseman

Literally riding the irons one horse at a time, Hugh Bowman gets on with the job after winning his first Sydney premiership.

WORDS AND PHOTOS  
JESS OWERS

Just shy of 6.15 in the morning, as dawn rolls over the grandstands of Royal Randwick, James Hugh Bowman swings a leg over the Hussonet colt Lentini. He is concentrating, a slight frown through his eyebrows and straight line across his lips, and he nods at Anthony Cummings, Lentini's trainer. Quiet once round for this one? Okay. And the clock goes off in his head. One red apple. Two red apple. Three red apple. The colt moves off and Hugh Bowman gets to work.

"Years ago when I arrived at Billy Aspros' place in Bathurst to do my apprenticeship," the 29-year-old jockey recalls, "the first thing Bill did was hand me a stopwatch and say that by the end of the week he wanted me to be able to count to 15 exactly. Count red apples, he said. One red apple. Two red apple. And to this day when I ride trackwork I count red apples." He pauses for a moment, measuring time. "I've been through buckets of them over the years." >

EYES ON THE PRIZE:  
Hugh Bowman has been "top three" in Sydney for the past five seasons.



Bowman is a man of routine, and every Tuesday and Saturday he is up before the birds counting apples around Randwick racecourse. He will ride for John O'Shea, Cummings or Graeme Rogerson, sometimes all three and more, and in crisp moleskins and cool Cuban heels he looks bigger than raceday Bowman. Still, the trademarks are there: the quiet hands and pensive expression, and the talent that won him the Sydney jockeys' crown this year.

"I thought at the beginning of the season that I could win the premierships with 80 or 90 winners," Bowman says, reflecting on the statistics of previous years. But on December 10 last year, when it was looking like he might do just that, he guided a horse called Withoutme off the rails at Rosehill and caused a three-horse pile-up, and was given a six-week suspension. "That was a terrible day," Bowman says, "I hope it doesn't happen again. I was beside myself for the horses and riders involved. But I also thought it had put me out of business for the premierships. So I thought, forget about it and just think about your 80 winners, and that's

**ON TRACK:** Hugh Bowman on Lentini, one of his morning mounts for Randwick trainer Anthony Cummings

**‘Life at the moment is ... not quite reality with the money I earn and the lifestyle I lead, the publicity and all that bizzo’**  
HUGH BOWMAN

what I did. I kept working towards that goal and nearly rode 100."

Bowman was only two short of it and his 98 winning rides for the 2008-09 season were 16 clear of his nearest rival and friend, Corey Brown. By August, he had put away three titles: the NSW state and metropolitan premierships, and the national title that saw him ride 150 winners, three more than persistent country champion Greg Ryan. But Bowman is no stranger to achievement. He was champion apprentice in Sydney in 2000, and in the past seven years of Sydney riding he has been among the top 10 of all jockeys. In the past five years he's been in the top three. So he's good then? "I suppose I am," he says, "but I've worked hard at it."

The cold stats on Bowman read well. For the season gone he had 739 rides for a 20 per cent strike rate at the wire. He rode 119 second places, tallied over \$8.3 million in prizemoney, and looked through the ears of Samantha Miss, Duporth and Racing To Win. He won three Group 1 contests, seven Group 2s and three Group 3s. His victories included the Golden Rose, AJC Oaks and Flight Stakes, and when he booted home Samantha Miss in the VRC Crown Oaks at Flemington he won his first Victorian Group 1 contest. Even his parents were there for that one.

"It was just the best day of my... you know," and Jim Bowman sighs before he finishes his sentence. Bowman's mother Mandy delights in the memory. "We decided four days before the race that we'd go down," she says. "We drove to Dubbo, flew to Sydney then flew to Melbourne, and we were back in Dubbo the very next day. It was a whirlwind, a spur of the moment decision, but we'd discussed waiting until (Samantha Miss) raced in Sydney in the autumn to see her, and of course we're glad we didn't." In February this year, when the champion filly bowed a tendon in Newcastle, all of the Bowmans were devastated.

Jim and Mandy are salt-of-the-earth folk common to the country. They have always had property, always had horses, and it's no surprise that their only son has gone the way he has. "When Hugh was tiny," recalls Jim, "I'd put him up on the front of the horse with me and he'd handle the reins, so when he started riding on his own he was quite natural. He must have been four one time and

we had him out at a local show and he won boy rider under-five or something. But one of the judges came up to me to say that that little boy had such lovely hands. He was only four." Jim is still amazed.

The Bowmans have their own thoroughbreds at their Merotherie property south-east of Dunedoo (about four hours drive north-west of Newcastle), and Jim has trained and raced on country circuits as long as he can remember. He keeps only a handful of gallopers, but they're good enough to win the Mudgee Cup now and then. "We didn't ever envisage that Hugh would be a professional jockey," says Mandy. "We thought he'd just ride at the picnic races and have a bit of fun doing it. But when he was riding the barrier trials around here, he must have been around 15, some of the people in racing saw him and said to Jim he'd be wasted as an amateur rider. He's got so much potential, they said, we should let him become a professional."

As mothers do, Mandy insisted her son's education was important, but if Hugh had continued his program at Scot's College, Sydney, where he boarded from the age of 12, he would have become too old and too heavy to infiltrate the ranks. So when he elected to leave school and court the racetrack, a place he describes with slow and deliberate affection, it was a great day for Sydney.

Off the track, life is good for Bowman. He drives a slick black Lexus, buys good clothes, plays golf off a handy handicap, and isn't ashamed of the finer things he can afford. "I like to wear nice clothes and I like to present myself well," he says. "The Lexus? Well, I'd really like to drive a \$150,000 car, and I've seriously thought about getting a car worth that sort of money. But although I could afford it, it's easy to get carried away with that sort of thing. Life at the moment is..." he thinks about this for a second, "not quite reality with the money I earn and the lifestyle I lead, the publicity and all that bizzo. It's nice to think you could have all those things, but you have to be realistic too and think about the future."

Bowman can say all this without being haughty or arrogant. He is a man appreciative of his luck but mindful of his hard work. "I earn a good living so I can afford to be like that," he says, and Christine Walsh, his Irish fiancée, has learned to understand him beautifully.

"We're very different," she says. "For example, Hugh likes to drive to the races in silence, whereas I love to chat. I love to talk." She is bubbling as she says so. "I think it annoys him sometimes."

Christine has accepted the stress that comes with her partner's constant dieting, the frustrations that follow it and the state of mind that Bowman finds himself in because of it. They will be married in December. But Christine is a headline of her own. This is the young woman who, in 2002, worked for Dermot Weld and made the front page of *The Australian* newspaper drilling Media Puzzle around Sandown two days before his Melbourne Cup win. She is animated, infectious, a quick-talking character and the sweetest type of girl next door. Since Media Puzzle, and meeting Bowman six years ago, she has become the on-course producer for TVN's Sydney meetings, and on race days she is barraged with racing identities wallowing in her energy.

But the serious side of being a professional jockey is never far from their minds, and in recent months there have been career-altering changes to their industry, and one in particular. "The whip rules have gone too far," Bowman states. Not noted for his aggressive whip riding in the first place, he is with nearly every other Australian jockey when he says that some horses need it. "Personally I'm not big on hitting horses," he says, "but there's no question that it helps them to win. And while I think the changes are a step in the right direction, I think they might need to be a bit more flexible with them, particularly inside the last 100 metres. What's going to happen here is we're going to start hitting them harder because we can't hit them as often."

In June 2007, Bowman headed to England for a three-month stint with West Ilsley trainer Mick Channon, during which time he learned quick-smart lessons in whip usage in the mother country. "When we were over there Hugh got suspended for overuse," Christine says, "but he was hitting with a feather duster compared to the likes of Jamie Spencer and the other boys." Bowman adds there was more to it. "When I arrived Mick said to me that I'd ride a few winners and get suspended for overuse of the whip, whether I hit them or not." Sure enough, when he clocked a few winners he was given an involuntary holiday. "I didn't let it bother me though," he says.



**TIME OFF:** Hugh Bowman plants a kiss on fiancée Christine Walsh.

Bowman's willingness to roll with things has made the latest changes to Australian race riding a little easier for him. It also makes him a very attractive customer. Bryan Haskins has been Bowman's manager for a decade, and says there is little that fazes his client. "He doesn't worry too much about too much," Haskins says, "and he doesn't drive me mad, which is a bonus." Trainer John O'Shea describes Bowman as the ultimate professional. The two have enjoyed a working relationship – and friendship – for years now, sharing success, especially with Group 1 hero Racing To Win, who broke back into the winners' list in the Group 2 Theo Marks Stakes (1400m) at Rosehill on September 12. "He is honest," O'Shea says of his stable jockey. "He has a good assessment of horses, and he's a team player. He makes a significant contribution to the preparation of the horses, and on race days he's got a good understanding of what's required to win the race."

But Bowman is also sensible about himself. He doesn't pretend to know everything about racing, so doesn't

preach out about the issues at hand. That doesn't mean, though, he'll shy from raising eyebrows. On June 24 at Gosford, as he guided Verrekeen clear of the pack in veteran race caller Ian Craig's last call, Bowman tipped his helmet to Craig 50 metres from the line, upsetting the stewards to the tune of \$300. It escalated his likeability. "I like to see him do well," John O'Shea says, "even if it's on other horses. I think I've gone on record saying that I started to use him years ago because one day he would be the champion rider of Sydney."

Thousands of red apples later, Hugh Bowman is just that. He teeters on the edge of proper brilliance; his own state title in one pocket, possibility gnawing in the other. Haskins says that the main aims from here are to win the premierships again, and to converge on the spring carnival, but Bowman himself is reticent. He's riding the irons one horse at a time. "If you set yourself unachievable goals" he says, "You're just going to break your heart all the time, aren't you? So I just do things realistically now." U



**HUGH BOWMAN**

**First ride**  
Go Campese, Mungery picnic races, 1996

**First win**  
Slatts, Wellington Picnic Cup, 1996

**First Group 1 win**  
Defier, Doomben Cup, 2004

**Total wins in Australia**  
About 1100 (by Bowman's estimation)

**Total Group 1 wins** 13

**Group 1 wins in 2008-09 season** 3 (Samantha Miss in Flight Stakes and VRC Oaks, Daffodil in AJC Oaks)

**Total wins in England** 33, including Benandonner in the Shergar Cup at Ascot, 2007

**Spring carnival commitments**  
With dual Group 1 winner Metal Bender injured, Bowman has no confirmed commitments in Melbourne. "I'll be in Sydney until the Cox Plate," he said. "But I'd still love to be down there for the carnival."