

THE ICEMAN BY .1 OF A SECOND

By Diana Dobson

Hawera dairy farmer Robert Steele figures he has a secret weapon helping him win the big classes.

On his home-bred horse Gospel, Steele won the BOMAC Norwood Gold Cup by .1 of a second on the opening day of the Kelt Capital Horse of the Year Show in Hastings.

Having to settle for second was long-time campaigner Maurice Beatson (Dannevirke) and his home-bred horse My Gollywog.

And while Steele – known as the Iceman by his mates who have to jump against him – did produce a fabulous jump-off over the Leopoldo Palacios-designed course, the secret of his success lies in two legs, not four.

Jim Ellis, chief executive of Equestrian Sports New Zealand, has been ringside for every one of his big wins this season – three world cup rounds.

“Maybe there’s something in it,” says the 40-year-old father of four.

Steele and Gospel – a 12-year-old gelding who was bred by his father – last won the Norwood Gold Cup in 2005.

It’s a cup that dates back to 1967 when former Olympian Joe Yorke and Challenge first won it.

The names on the trophy reads like a who’s who of New Zealand showjumping, and include fellow Olympians Beatson, John Cottle and Jeff McVean, and other top riders.

But today it was Steele who was the toast of the show with his win.

Six went through to the jump off from the 28 starters – Anna Trent (Auckland) on Cortaflex Muskateer NZPH, Team Thathorse Simon Wilson (Waipukurau) and Swinger, Oliver Edgecombe (Waipukurau) and JJ Freelance, the world class John Whitaker (Great Britain) on Dunstan Hairy McClairy, Steele and Beatson.

In the end it was just hundredths of seconds that separated the top three - .1 between Beatson and Steele, with Wilson .31 of a second behind Beatson.

Steele was thrilled with his win, made all the more special because it is a horse he has brought through the grades himself.

“We’ve had such a consistent season – it’s awesome. Let’s hope it continues.”

They will start in the Bell Tea Olympic Cup – the ultimate class at the show with a prize purse of \$500,000 – on Sunday.

Earlier in the day Great Britain’s top female rider Ellen Whitaker celebrated her 22nd birthday and debut in New Zealand in fine style with a win on the borrowed mount Kiwi Brave in the 1.35m class.

Whitaker is delighted to be competing in New Zealand. She has been Britain's top female rider for the past six years and is a strong contender for the Beijing Olympics.

Her result was all the more remarkable because Kiwi Brave, who is owned by Molly Bennett (Wairoa), has been out of the ring for most of the season while her owner concentrated on her new baby.

It was a ladies jump off, between Whitaker, Katie McVean (Mystery Creek) on Dunstan Daffodil, and Anna Stephen (Martinborough) and Constantine.

Today (Wednesday) is the opening day of the five-day show, which culminates with the Olympic Cup on Sunday for the Horse of the Year.

The four star show is one of the largest sporting celebrations in the Southern Hemisphere and has attracted 2500 horses and ponies with their riders.

Highlights of the show include the return of Mark Todd (Canterbury) and Gandalf, who will ride in an eventing invitational on Saturday, and a hotly-contested Tri Nations battle between South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Results –

Norwood Gold Cup: Robert Steele (Hawera) Gospel 1, Maurice Beatson (Dannevirke) My Gollywog 2, Team Thathorse Simon Wilson (Waipukurau) Swinger 3, John Whitaker (Great Britain) Dunstan Hairy McClairy (owned by Katie McVean, Mystery Creek) 4, Anna Trent (Auckland) Cortaflex Muskateer NZPH 5, Team Thathorse Oliver Edgecombe (Waipukurau) JJ Freelance 6.

1.35m horse: Ellen Whitaker (Great Britain) Kiwi Brave (owned by Molly Bennett, Wairoa) 1, Anna Stephen (Martinborough) Constantine 2, Katie McVean (Mystery Creek) Dunstan Daffodil 3, Doug Isaacson (Dannevirke) Brother Brown, Ike Unsworth (Tauranga) Seremonie VLD =4, Robert Steele (Hawera) Countryman, Claudia Hay (Mosgiel) Valentino Rossi, Anna Trent (Auckland) Untouchable =6.