

BAYLEY'S HAWKE'S BAY SILVER FERN HORSE STAKES

By Diana Dobson

Simon Wilson almost didn't start in the \$15,000 Bayley's Hawke's Bay Silver Fern Stakes at the Kelt Capital Horse of the Year Show in Hastings this evening (fri).

A fall this morning almost put paid to Wilson's day, but an hour before the class he changed his mind and is now all the more better off for it.

The 36-year-old Waipukurau farmer who rides for Team Thathorse almost snagged first and second spots in the talent-rich class, but in the end had to settle for just first place.

He and Swinger were one of 12 combinations to go through from the 20 starters. The line-up was impressive, featuring former Olympians, World Cup winners and plenty of talent.

But the only ones who went clear over the rather large track were Robert Steele (Hawera) on Gospel, who won the Norwood Gold Cup on the opening day of the five day show, Catherine Cameron (Cambridge) on Kahurangi Valentino, Team Thathorse Oliver Edgecombe (Waipukurau) on Vancouver, Maurice Beatson (Dannevirke) on My Gollywog, Wilson on both Right Royal and Swinger, and Ike Unsworth (Tauranga) on Seremonie VDL, who picked up just a time fault in the opening round.

Joining them were four faulters Team Thathorse Claire Wilson (Waipukurau) on Sacred Hill Answer Back, Katie McVean (Mystery Creek) on Forest II, Anna Trent (Auckland) Cortaflex Muskateer NZPH and Sue Thompson (Hastings) on Air Hill the Rajah.

But the day belonged to Wilson – albeit it didn't start as he would have liked. He had to give up his spot in the New Zealand team in the Tri Nations Challenge after falling from six-year-old Fredrixberg when warming up. It left him decidedly battered and bruised but did nothing to dampen his competitive spirit. Wilson has had 14-year-old Swinger since he was a baby, buying him off his uncle Harvey Wilson and bringing him through the grades. Together, Swinger and Wilson won the Horse of the Year crown in 2005. They placed third in the Norwood Gold Cup on the first day of the show.

"To pick up a big class like this is very pleasing," he said.

And the prize money certainly put a big smile on his rather grazed face.

Wilson said he aimed to go clear and credits his trainer Greg Best with much of his success.

"He is so positive to work with."

As Wilson rode into the ring in the second round, Steele and Gospel had already posted a double clear round, stopping the clock at 58.26. Second round clears went to McVean and Trent, but both were carrying four faults from the opening round.

"I wanted double clear, and if I was lucky enough to win then that would be awesome," says Wilson.

Right Royal was the last horse to go, and Wilson only had himself to beat – as it turned out, it wasn't to be. He took the first rail, so had to pick up the speed which in the end proved costly and finished out of the money with his second mount.

It has been a patchy season for Wilson.

"Things haven't gone my way a lot of the time, but you just have to put that behind you and get on with the next class."

Wilson plans to rest his top horses Swinger and Right Royal on Saturday, in readiness for the big class, the Bell Tea Olympic Cup, on Sunday.

Double Olympic silver medalist and New Zealand coach Greg Best said he loved the format of the Silver Fern Stakes, where runs over two full rounds, rather than a shortened jump-off course.

"We've done this for all our World Cup rounds this year and I truly believe this is how we get the best horses coming to the front," he says. "It is not about blazing speed – it is getting out there and jumping the big jumps."

Results –

Team Thathorse Simon Wilson (Waipukurau) Swinger 1, Robert Steele (Hawera) Gospel 2, Team Thathorse Oliver Edgecombe (Waipukurau) Vancouver 3, Anna Trent (Auckland) Cortaflex Muskateer NZPH 4, Maurice Beatson (Dannevirke) My Gollywog 5, Katie McVean (Mystery Creek) Forest II 6.