



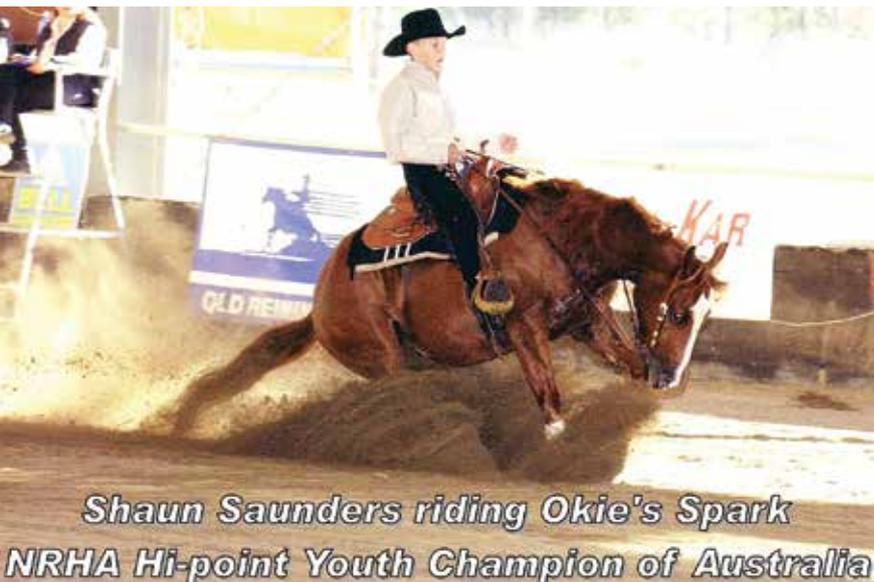
Shaun Saunders

Setting High Standards...

Shaun Saunders

ARTICLE: GITA THOMAS

HAVING known Shaun personally for the past 5 years, some words that come to mind that would best describe him would have to be that he's a very goal driven, focused guy. Shaun's been out there demonstrating his talent and skill for many years in reining arena's both nationally and internationally, so it's time we got to know a little more about his journey and what it's taken for him to get thus far in his very successful career. Shaun has been Australia's number 1 Money earning Reiner for the past 3 years.



Shaun Saunders riding Okie's Spark
NRHA Hi-point Youth Champion of Australia



Shaun's football team



Shaun and Hayley

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Setting high standards has been *'the standard'* for Shaun. Having the ability to focus and show strong self-discipline saw Shaun achieve at a high level from a young age; in most aspects of his life including school academic awards, playing school A grade rugby league and his main passion, horse training.

THE EARLY DAYS

Shaun grew up on a property's with his parents and brothers in Central Queensland, and from a young age was obsessed with horses. His parents recall how he would often disappear

from the schoolroom when he was doing distance education, and be off on his horse before they knew it. He would also spend time watching training tapes even when at primary school – the neighbours would marvel at his level of focus. With high school came the necessity to go boarding school. He spent grade 8 & 9 at St Brendan's College in Yeppoon. One of Shaun's fondest memories from boarding school was playing half back for the A grade college rugby league team and winning the grand final.

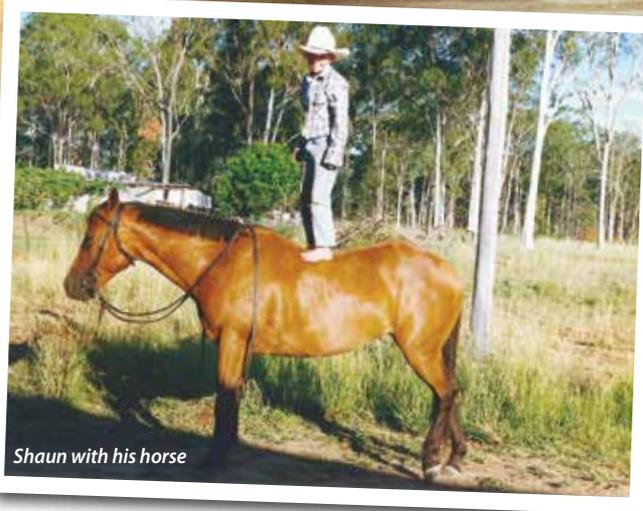
When the family moved to Boonah when Shaun was 15, he was able to pursue his love of horse training. His life totally revolved around his horses which he rode every day one before and one after school. Tony Fookes often remarked on Shaun's success being borne of miles and miles of circles with the well worn circle track in the corner of his Dad's cultivation, an obvious sign of his hard work, drive and dedication.

Shaun came through the ranks of reining, training his own horses and loved the sport and the challenge of getting his horses shown. Watching others train on their horses at shows and going home and trying things he thought might

Shaun at 2015 Reining Australia Futurity on QXH Docs Stylish Oak
Photo by: Mel Jane Photography



Shaun Saunders
Condor Smart Play
Winner Open Derby
Photo by: Downunder Photography



Shaun with his horse

work for him. Shaun would watch runs from USA and training DVD's or videos and study the sport.

His formula worked as he won 2004 National high Point youth on Oakies Spark. Shaun and his Dad travelled to all major shows nationally that year to campaign his horse.

It was during this time that Shaun trained Sheza Bonnie and here's the story of how he arrived at being the youngest reining competitor to win Open Derby Champion in 2005. His story is inspiring for young reiners out there wanting to train their own horse and to understand success is something you have to work hard to achieve.

"I had trained a mare that my Dad bred, Sheza Bonnie through her futurity year for her to cap her hock in a travel accident as a three year old and miss the futurity in 2004." Sheza Bonnie was an unlikely reiner she was out of a thoroughbred/foundation mare by Docs Bon Jovi, She was a sweet little filly with a baldy face. "Dad and Warren Backhouse organised a deal breaking

her in for a saddle. After several weeks we found out she could buck!! She bucked off one of Warrens help three times and he refused to get back on her, he probably prefers we don't mention his name. Warren had to get on her and the story goes that his knees were blue a little while getting it done. I was probably pretty lucky she could buck or else Dad might still have her".

"After a few months at Warren's we took her home and I got to work on getting her ready for the Futurity, I was pretty careful with her knowing she could buck. She only bucked once when Dad and I were mustering in a big paddock and a bird flew out from the grass she went off and nearly got me, luckily she spooked and ran and I held on by the horn and pulled myself back to the middle".

"She was always a big stopper but took a little while to learn to move her front end and had a lot of grit - she was a big hearted mare with a lot of try. Back then we didn't have an arena so I would take her down to the cultivated paddocks and lope circles. It was great as there

were no fences for 3 acres so if they were going to leave a circle they would do it. At that point in my life I had the influences of Jason Wordsworth and Warren Backhouse, who used totally different methods. Warren was big on softness and at that time had his horses very bridled and Jason was a big Dell Hendricks man, he was all about pitching them away and giving them responsibility, so I tried to mix the two and I think it worked well. I had a track worn in the paddock and every time the horse would leave the track I steered them back through the middle of that circle. After time I had Bonnie where she wouldn't leave that circle on a draped rein. I never really got a chance to work on stops other than when we drove to Gatton Equestrian Centre to ride but it didn't seem to bother her too much, she always stopped".

At 17 Shaun won the hotly contested Victorian Open Derby riding Oakies Spark with a 75, the Non Pro Derby and Open Non Pro, The QRHA Open and the National Reining Open Derby on Sheza Bonnie and top scoring at all these shows.



Shaun Saunders at Equitana - Photo by: Jessica Atkins



"I fell in love with the sport and the people and really enjoyed it, when you're getting into the sport and you get with a trainer it is a lot of fun as you go on that journey of learning and improving and you get a lot of wow moments. People are generally very helpful and encouraging of new people going in to the industry".

In 2006 Shaun moved to Victoria to start work for Ian and Judy Waldron at Opal Park Stud. In this time Shaun got the opportunity to ride in the USA with several trainers and also showed OP Finally Dunit in his first Open Futurity to 3rd Place.

In 2007 Shaun took a break from serious competition to gain a trade. "At this time I felt like I had a lot of expectation on myself in the show arena having achieved so much and felt like I needed time to step back and learn more. My father always said that I should get a trade and not wanting to get too far away from horses I decided this could be a good trade to have under my belt". Shaun completed his Farrier Apprenticeship and was named 3rd year Apprentice of the year. Glenn Wise was his mentor through his early years doing his shoeing apprenticeship. Shaun learnt quickly and got through his 4-year apprenticeship in 3 years.

In 2009 Shaun moved to Kandanga to work with Warren starting and training two and three year olds at Backhouse Training Stables, being lured by his daughter Hayley. After three years and a lot of encouragement from their clients, Shaun and Hayley decided it was time to branch out on their own.

They moved to Wamuran to start Saunders Performance Horses and it was at this time that Shaun started doing more of his own clinics. Being a student of Reining and Horsemanship in general, clinics were an area Shaun wanted to expand upon and share his knowledge to help horse enthusiasts. There were many horses Shaun trained and showed throughout this time including starting, training and showing many futurity horses for Non Pro Reiners. Shaun felt there was a gap to fill in the industry and showing the aged event horses is something that inspires him.

At the end of 2011 Shaun went to ride with Shawn Flarida at his place in Ohio, he got to visit many places in OK and Texas and visit with many of the big breeders. He also got to visit Jordan Larson.

Shaun and Hayley were keen to ensure their business was a success and wrote up their business plan to be the number one training stables in Australia. With Shaun training the horses and Hayley competently handling the books and a lot of the care of the horses, Saunders Performance Horses took off.

Shaun had campaigned Whizz Peppy for Charles Kalnins from the end of 2010 and got him over \$40,000 becoming the first horse in Australia to do so. Shaun rode Whizz Peppy to a 76.5 under American Judge Ollie Griffith, which at the time equalled the highest score in Australia. Whizz Peppy also went on to great success at the SPH stables winning, RA National Championships Open Reserve

Champion and Equitana Open Reserve Champion, this put Whizz Peppy's Life Time Earnings over \$50,000. Whizz Peppy to this day is still the highest earning horse in Australian Reining with LTE just shy of \$70,000.

It was in 2013 that Shaun and Hayley welcomed into the world their first child, Alexis Grace Saunders. Those who have young children and are in business would understand the many challenges the family would have faced in such a time demanding industry. But this year shaped up to be one of Saunders Performance Horses most successful to date.

Shaun rode Astonlee Kool Hustler to reserve champion at the PCRS Open futurity and he was the Open Derby Reserve Champion and Open Champion on Whiz Destiny consistently scoring 75's. Whiz Destiny was in top form having just stepped back into the show pen after having her first foal in 2012.

Shaun and A Little Elroy claimed the QRHA Derby Shootout Championship amongst a strong field of some of Australia's best derby horses. A Little Elroy was only a 4 year-old at the time and had very limited showing. Reining Australia's National Derby was held in conjunction with the AQHA Nationals and it was at this event that Whiz Destiny and Shaun were Reserve Champion in the Open Derby. At the QRHA State Championships Shaun claimed the Open Futurity Championship aboard A Hollywood Whizz, the Open Derby on Whiz Destiny and was Reserve Champion in the Open riding Whizz Peppy.

Shaun Saunders

Hayley had also shown Whizz Peppy the day before to win the Ladies. This was Hayley's first ride in the show pen since having Alexis earlier that year. The RA Nationals was another good show for Saunders Performance Horses and for the QRHA club winning the Affiliate Championships. Their Non Pros had a great show with Tim Hoffmann winning the Non Pro Classic for the second year in a row. Greer Campbell won the Youth. Shaun and A Little Elroy won the Open and the Open Classic for owner Julie Johnson and A Hollywood Whizz was Reserve Champion in the Open Futurity by half a point.

Equitana 2013 saw Shaun ride Scott & Kate Glovers Ruf Major imp to Reserve Champions and ended up with 3 horses in the top 5 standings, Whizz Peppy coming in 3rd and A Little Elroy 5th. That year Shaun earned over \$39,000 in prize money and for the year of 2013 Shaun was Australia's leading money earner.

The World Equestrian Games was a major highlight for Shaun in 2014 representing the Australian Reining Team in Normandy France. Shaun rode Sparkin Tinsel owned by Corina Schumacher and helped the Australian team to a 5th place finish being knocked out of third and then fourth by the last couple of horses, one of the highest placing for Australia across all disciplines at the World Equestrian Games. Shaun headed over to Normandy 2 weeks before the major competition to get to know his horse and prepare for riding on the world class stage, which being such a young competitor would test even the most seasoned of riders.

"Sparkin Tinsel was a nice horse that was good minded. He had been shown quite a lot by different people so I didn't really know what to expect but we set up some pre works at Schumacher's and that gave me an indication on what he would be like. Spending time with the Lacombe's was also a great experience as they are well known and well-respected worldwide," said Shaun. Having time to have a break in such a beautiful area, seeing some of Switzerland, Italy and France was a great experience, it was great to share that with his wife Hayley.

This past year saw many more championship wins that helped to contribute towards Shaun's impressive Life Time Earnings total, riding Hasta La Vista to take out High point Open and Mare of the year 2015 meant a lot to both Shaun and Hayley as this is their own mare. Its worth remembering Shaun is still in his 20's with many more goals to shoot for, and his accomplishments to date are many and varied for both himself personally as well as his Non Pro clients he mentors and coaches along the way. We are all wishing him well in his endeavor to reach his acclaimed \$200,000 milestone this coming year.

"I have to dedicate a lot of my success over the past four years to great clients and my close friends and family for their inspiration and support. My Parents are my true role models and have done the best they can for me and my brothers with what they have, I believe the most important lesson they have taught me is that if you can't quite see where you're going, take few more steps and you'll see further. I would like to thank my wife Hayley for her hard work, dedication and support."

"My advice to anyone out there wanting to pursue a career in horses or training is to be patient, it doesn't have to be perfect and no matter what your trying to achieve if you work toward confidence with you and your horse you will get there a lot quicker. Take failure or losing with a grain of salt, there is always another horse show and the right people will stick with you if you just be yourself". If you want an easy cruisy life then horses aren't for you. If you don't mind getting a little busted up, getting a little dusty and love a life style of hard work then the rewards are great.

"Failure is only failure if you quit and you don't learn something from it. The only way to get anywhere is step-by-step, set short-term goals and work at them. There is an old saying out there that if you want to soar like an eagle you can't scratch with the turkeys. I believe in this and I have always tried to go where I thought there was the best opportunity or to work or ride with the best. Sometimes you won't always get the answers you want but ask the question. Sometimes you can get the

most out of watching people and how they deal with situations".

"If you go out and show your horses to the best of your and their ability at that point of time in there training that is all you and anyone else can expect. One of the biggest challenges for most horse trainers with young families is finding the balance between family life and the huge workload and running a successful and profitable business."

"Reining is a great spectator sport that has the potential to grow and really entertain crowds in this country. It truly is a sport of horsemanship in my opinion displaying the partnership of horse and rider at high speed on a loose rein, show casing a horses athletic potential and ability to perform difficult maneuvers with subtle cues. I believe with the creation of groups like RTA that we have the opportunity to grow the sport in size and prize money for our client's horses to run for by donating our time to teaching new people, which in turn puts money in the pool for our client's horses to run for. 🐾

As with all great athletes Shaun would like to thank his owners and sponsors for their support.

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- Thomas Arena Products
- Ian Saunders Custom Saddles
- Equissage

Visit Saunders Performance Horse website www.saundersperformancehorses.com.au for contact information and more great reading on what Shaun can do to assist you with getting your horses show ready to the highest standard.

I thought from the first time I met Shaun I knew he would end up doing something in the horse business. He had a real gift and passion for riding. His parents gave him a great start on a central Queensland cattle property. He had a good seat on a horse and quiet hands. I guess I must have been the first to introduce him to reining. I helped him with the basic training of his first Reiner. I then went to the US but it was no surprise to me that he forged his way in the reining horse business in Australia to become one of the best trainers here. He is a very dedicated and focused young man.

Jason Wordsworth