

## Young Emily Sets a Stirling Example

FIRST PUBLISHED BY AMANDA YOUNG, EQUESTRIAN LIFE MAGAZINE

Despite setbacks, young show jumper Emily Stirling is the first to proclaim her luck. A successful competitor, coach and entrepreneur, Emily has built her career on ethics and responsibility.

“There’s so much more to horses than just riding,” says Emily Stirling, who at the tender age of 21 has already built an ever-expanding business that embodies this ethic. The 2019 Victorian Young Rider of the Year for Jumping may be striving to reach the giddy heights of global success in the glamorous sport of show jumping, however, it’s the love of the horse – rather than the glory and the ribbons – that keeps her grounded and drives her forward.

Emily runs Cloroy Park, a coaching, breeding, spelling and rehabilitation business in Victoria’s Bacchus Marsh in conjunction with her grandfather Geoff Closter, while also campaigning a team of show jumpers – all mares – who she fondly refers to as “my girls”.

“My grandfather took me to a carnival one time – I must have been about four, and he sat me on a pony – and it all went from there! I started lessons and then when I was eight he bought me my first pony. He thought it might just be a phase – I’ve always said I don’t really think he knew what he was getting himself into!” Emily laughs.

The horse phase was there to stay; from humble Pony Club beginnings, Emily developed an interest in show jumping and started jumping competitively at the age of 12. She hasn’t looked back.

“I’m very lucky that I had access to Jess Pateman, or Barton as she was then, and I started having lessons with her. Then I started going to shows with her and something just clicked – I knew that was what I wanted to do,” Emily explains, when asked what attracted her to show jumping over the other disciplines. “I love jumping around a course, and show jumping is a great sport that you can do so much with; there are so many opportunities that can come out of it, here in Australia and also in Europe and America where the sport is so big.”

For Emily, the first opportunity – one that would contribute to her decision to pursue a career as a professional rider and coach – came about when she was just 17 years old in the form of an amazing trip overseas to represent Australia at Haras de Jardy – a jumping competition in Paris. The once-in-a-lifetime trip opened her eyes to the magnitude of the sport and left her inspired and brimming with business ideas before she had even finished high school.

“I completed year 11 and 12 via distance education. When I was 15, I was diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, which threw a bit of a spanner in the works,” Emily explains. “I’d always been interested in law and veterinary science, and thought I’d pursue one of those avenues after school. It’s hard at a young age, so many young people are pressured to know what they want to do, and not many people can figure it out. So I took a gap year after school, and during that year I started teaching some local kids riding lessons. When I came back from Europe the year before, having seen how they run lessons and training programs over there, I’d developed a bit of a vision of what I wanted to do with horses on the side, but then it got so big during that gap year that I thought ‘I can make a living out of this, let’s keep going!’”

Emily’s 2017 trip to France not only influenced her career choices, it provided her with a chance to meet other young riders from around the world and gain insight into a very different approach to owning and riding horses than the one she had grown up with.

“The opportunity to go to Paris came about through a lovely friend of mine from New South Wales, Jamie Priestley and her family. There was a big competition going on over there, and a training program, and they wanted a few riders from each country. Jamie went as a Young Rider and I went as a Junior for Australia and

we were in a team of riders from countries including Sri Lanka and Thailand!” Emily enthuses. “We were also able to watch a leg of the Global Champions Tour which was incredible too.”

While the excitement and inspiration of such an experience stayed with Emily, so too did her reaction to the culture in Europe, whereby some riders’ time with their horses does not extend far beyond those hours spent in the saddle.

“Growing up doing Pony Club, I learnt that you’ve got to saddle your horse, you’ve got to do all of that. In Europe, it’s a bit different. The sport’s so big; a lot of owners or riders can go to the stables where the horse will be already tacked up or warmed up, they get on, they ride, they jump, then get off the horse and go home,” Emily explains. “It’s similar at the shows; everything is done for them, which is fine, but that’s not how I wanted to do things here in Australia. It inspired me to come home and think more about how too many kids over here get into horses because they want to ride, and then their horses end up getting neglected or sold on because they’re not looked after properly.”

When Emily established a teaching program at Cloroy Park the following year, her observations from Europe led her to implement a structure and entry criteria that would help ensure that she was not just developing riders, she was instilling an understanding and appreciation of horse care and management. “From the start, my rule was that if you wanted to come for lessons, you had to commit to 15 minutes of horsemanship prior to and after your lesson as well as the riding part. And if you weren’t prepared to do that, then you weren’t allowed to come!”

It’s clear that building and developing the right culture and atmosphere at Cloroy Park was as important to Emily as the building and development of the facility’s physical structure. She’s worked hard to create a supportive, family-like environment, an approach that reflects the way that she has been raised, influenced and mentored throughout her life to date. Emily may dream big, and have lofty goals, but she is well aware that nothing is achieved in isolation and the kind of support she has received from her family and friends – in particular her grandfather – is critically important.

“My grandfather is so supportive and encouraging; any direction I have ever wanted to go in, anything I wanted to try, he was always behind me 100%. He has driven the truck for me all around the country so I could go to shows, he is just incredible and amazing to work with,” Emily reflects. “He’s been the rock behind me, and I wouldn’t have been able to do any of this without him.”

While Emily’s grandfather, Geoff, now lives in town, he arrives at Cloroy Park every single day at 8am, ready to work alongside Emily. Her mother and sister – who are both allergic to horses but are nevertheless great supporters of Emily – live in the main house at Cloroy Park, while Emily lives in a self-contained unit in the stables. Over the last few years, the property has expanded in size and scope; it’s now around 50 acres in total, and boasts incredible horse facilities in addition to stunning gardens and hundreds of rose bushes!

Just as the property has evolved, so too has the business structure. When Emily first established Cloroy Park’s coaching services, she offered lessons on a range of horses including her Junior and Young Rider jumpers, who had retired from competition life. By 2019, Emily had 75 clients and was teaching up to 15 lessons a day! Juggling coaching commitments, a performance horse team and a breeding program, Emily made the decision to move to a model whereby she only coaches students on their own horses, reducing the client base to around 30 students in 2021.

"I love coaching, and I'm very lucky that I've found a way to keep coaching but also focus on my own horses and riding," Emily explains, adding that the changed structure has also allowed more time to focus on the breeding program and new services offered at Cloroy Park, including spelling and injury rehabilitation.

Being relatively close in age to many of her students means Emily is a highly relatable coach, particularly for teenagers. "If they're having a bad day, and they're getting a bit upset and flustered, I think okay, I've been there, I've done that," Emily explains. "A lot of these young girls that are so keen, they put so much pressure on themselves and I was exactly the same. So much pressure – that's probably been one of my biggest flaws, trying to make it perfect and trying to do everything right. But that's not always how it goes with horses! Sometimes we need a bit of a reality check, a reminder that they are animals; they could easily not jump for us, but they do. We all – myself included – need to take a breath and remember that we do this because we love the horse."

"Some of my students board their horses here at Cloroy Park, including eight girls from the age of 12 to 15, and we've grown so close as a team that they're like part of the family! They're out here every single day. If I need them to, they can feed up or help me tack up horses, they can get on and ride them. I can rely on them 100%, and that puts me in a position where I can help them even more just like they help me, and I don't need to have staff – except one employee who looks after the gardens!"

Like so many riders, Emily's competition goals were interrupted by the impacts of the pandemic in 2020, however, she's excited to be back in action with her team of horses and students this year, having already attended a few low-key events to get the year underway. The return to competitions is particularly exciting for Emily as the impact of Covid-19 wasn't the only setback she's faced in recent years.

In April 2019, while travelling to Queensland to compete at the Aquis Champions Tour (Elysian Fields), Emily's beloved mare Tulara Diarakato – known as Ellie – developed colic while overnighing in Goondiwindi, resulting in a desperate dash to Darling Downs Vets for emergency surgery.

"When we got there they scanned her and told me it wasn't looking great, and that they'd put her down on the table if they needed to, as she had twisted her bowels," Emily recalls. "I was distraught, but amazingly, she pulled through! She's such a tough girl, and I didn't care whether I'd never jump her again or even ride her.

"She's jumping again now, she's just incredible. We went to this little show on the weekend, and when I came out of the ring after she'd jumped a clear round I just burst into tears, it was a very emotional moment," says Emily, adding: "I'm in a position now where I don't want to do anything that will increase her risk of colic, so we probably won't travel her interstate for shows. I love this horse so much; I don't want to put her in that position. So we're just going to jump her at some small shows, see if she's comfortable travelling, jumping and coming home, and go from there."

Just as Ellie has conquered serious health problems, so too has Emily. Having managed chronic fatigue syndrome since the age of 15, Emily suffered a major setback in the second half of 2019 when she had a bad accident. A fall aggravated the brain cyst from which her chronic fatigue stems, and the recovery was lengthy.

"When the accident occurred I knew I had concussion because I was knocked out, so I went to the doctor. My balance was off, I had nausea all the time, I was forgetting things, I was sick," Emily explains. "But then a week later I was still really, really sick. So I went and saw my neurologist and he did a balance test on me where I just had to close my eyes and walk in a straight line and within two seconds I face-planted into the floor. And that's the point where as a rider, you've got to say 'okay, don't push yourself, there's something not right!' So in total it was a good six months of recovery – just in time for everything to be cancelled due to Covid – it really did all hit at once!"

Rather than dwelling on the negatives, Emily is quick to explain that 2020 was actually a great year for her in many ways. In 2019 she made the decision to start breeding elite show jumping horses, meaning she had an exciting foal crop due in 2020.

"I timed it well, didn't I? Breeding in 2019 so I had foals due in 2020!" Emily laughs, adding, "I tell you what, I had so much to look forward to in 2020, when a lot of people sadly didn't. I was very lucky. Originally, I only planned to have four foals but now somehow, I have eight - oops - there are some opportunities you simply can't pass up! It's been the greatest experience."

Breeding horses is not for the faint-hearted; Emily's first foaling season included a sepsis scare with the third foal born - fortunately, he pulled through - and an orphaned foal. "I was thrown in the deep end, that was an experience and a half, but after a lot of persistence, tears and sleep deprivation, the orphaned filly is doing well," Emily explains, adding that she now has five confirmed pregnancies for 2021, having bred to imported stallions Copabella Visage, Black Jack IXE and Fontaine Blue VDL.

The paddocks of Cloroy Park are certainly home to some exciting young horses, including embryo transfer foals from Emily's performance mares Tulara Diakarato, Our Kohinur and Stoneleigh Sunday Rose. In addition, there is a supremely talented three-year-old gelding, Tulara Cascara (Cascadello 1/Colman), who Emily has high hopes for.

"He's a really, really exciting young horse, a bit of a freak really, who I purchased from Mark Fraser at Tulara Warmbloods. Mark and I posted a few videos of him online a little while ago and that resulted in quite a lot of interest and some really, really good offers. But I thought, you know what? I think he's a star for the future and I think he'll be the one to take me overseas - that's the long-term plan, we're going to take our time with him - so I said no," says Emily, adding: "I'm also very lucky that I've got three foals by him. He served five mares before he was gelded, two accidentally when he jumped the fence!"

The future may be awash with opportunity, but Emily is a patient person who appreciates the present and focuses on what's immediately ahead. As 2021 unfolds, she's looking forward to getting in the ring with her team - including Our Kohinur, an experienced Vivant mare who she purchased 18 months ago with the view to jumping some bigger tracks - and focusing on the continuous development of not only her students, but also her own riding, under the watchful eye of coach Russell Johnstone. There's no doubt that the best is yet to come for Emily Stirling and her team at Cloroy Park.

## **BARASTOC ON BOARD**

A Barastoc ambassador since 2019, Emily Stirling has found Barastoc feeds to be the perfect fit for the range of horses at Cloroy Park, past and present.

"There's something suitable for every horse! Having all kinds of horses here from performance horses, to retirees, broodmares, foals, youngstock and even ponies, I can always get their diet right with Barastoc's help," Emily explains. "Whenever I ring Andrew Soper from Barastoc to say 'I've got a horse with this problem, or this issue, or what should I feed this one?' he can explain which products will best suit, and that is what I love about Barastoc."

Cloroy Park's broodmares and young stock are all fed on Breed n Grow, a fully fortified, low starch pellet formulated to support the steady growth of young stock and help minimise growth and developmental disorders.

"For the competition horses I'm a big fan of Complete Performer; I like that it's a muesli style feed and I've had really, really good results with it, it doesn't make them too hot," Emily explains. "I also feed them Barastoc Groom for their hooves, coat and general health. The new Supreme product looks very interesting and something we will definitely add down the track!"