

# Ribbons Royale

*'You win a Sydney Royal ribbon, you are up a grade, you are accepted. Then you start winning a bigger one, like your first prize, then pick a broad ribbon up and oh you've made it, and so you're in the business.'*

PHILLIP CARTER, HONORARY COUNCILLOR

WORDS: VICKI HASTRICH

**W**hen Sydney Royal Easter Show stalwart and Honorary Councillor, Phillip Carter talks ribbons his voice crackles with pride. Even after 60 years of competition, the thrill of winning one is undiminished.

That's because whatever other prizes go along with finishing foremost, it's that brightly coloured strip of fabric which packs the most power as a symbol of achievement. Such a humble token really, but concentrated in it is the recognition by expert judges, the folks who ought to know, of what it takes to win: hard work, patience, skill and the accumulated experience of years. As Phillip Carter implies, it's all about a hierarchy of excellence: it's all about respect.

Since 1869 and quite possibly before, the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW has awarded ribbons. That year a notice was printed in the horse catalogue standardising colours – red tickets and ribbons were to indicate first place, blue was for second – the opposite of today.

While no 19th century ribbons have been recovered, the RAS Heritage Centre has a large collection dating back a century to 1911, to which new examples are regularly added, ensuring a continuing record of this important aspect of the Show.

A conservation project begun in 2006 to catalogue and rehouse every ribbon has finally been completed, thanks mainly to the dedication of long-time Heritage Centre volunteer Anne Sanders. Once a week she has arrived to do the careful work of preparing, describing and wrapping a surprising variety of ribbons and rosettes. Some are homely – coarse felts with crude lettering – while others, silks with gold thread embroidery and heavy fringes, richly declare their importance. Some bear the splash marks of champagne, some the dirt of the ring.

The oldest ribbon in the collection of nearly 2000 is stitched into a blanket made up of broad ribbons won between 1911 – 1920. The blanket was donated by Lyn Goulder whose father, Harry, and grandfather, Jack 'the Boss' Smith, were legendary horsemen of the Southern Highlands. After her father's death Lyn came across the blanket and many other ribbons, all beautifully wrapped. Some of the ribbons had been won by her three uncles who also competed and some had belonged to her other grandfather, Fred Stubbs, who as stud master at the Hordern property, Retford Park, was responsible for producing many great champions. Together the ribbons represent over 50

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**Left:** HRH Prince Philip awards a young bull with a ribbon at the Moore Park Showground in 1971.  
**Below:** Champion axeman Tom Kirk, wearing his prized ribbon, 1948.

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years of family achievement at the Sydney Royal Easter Show.

Donations by other generous individuals have broadened the Heritage Centre collection so that it also includes ribbons from a range of regional and metropolitan shows as well as many awarded by breed societies, especially those active during the 1920s and 30s.

The fragile silks of the old ribbons which need such careful handling have long been replaced by more durable fibres, a trend which Anne Sanders believes took off with the introduction of sateen sashes for the Miss Showgirl competition. Coats of arms, badges and other decorative embellishments feature on later ribbons, often to celebrate landmark shows – the 1982 centenary at Moore Park, for example, also the last Show there, and the first at Homebush.

Competition at the Sydney Royal Easter Show occurs on such a grand scale now that this year nearly 17,000 ribbons were awarded. Of course, it's not just the top place getters who receive them. Since the 1990s ribbons in brown, beige,

pink, orange and lime green have been issued to encourage those placed sixth to tenth. But the envy of all remains the broad ribbon. Given only to champions, the red, white and blue striped ribbon is the Holy Grail. Even the most urban-centric members of the general public shuffling past pens and stalls and through crowded halls know they're in the presence of agricultural excellence whenever they see those tri-colours proudly displayed.

"In the stud business you've got to win those big ribbons then up you go," says Phillip Carter.

The veteran exhibitor doubts he'll snare any more broad ribbons now. The two hundred he already has ought to be enough to satisfy anyone but he's still on the hunt to boost his overall tally. His total from Royal Shows is just short of a thousand.

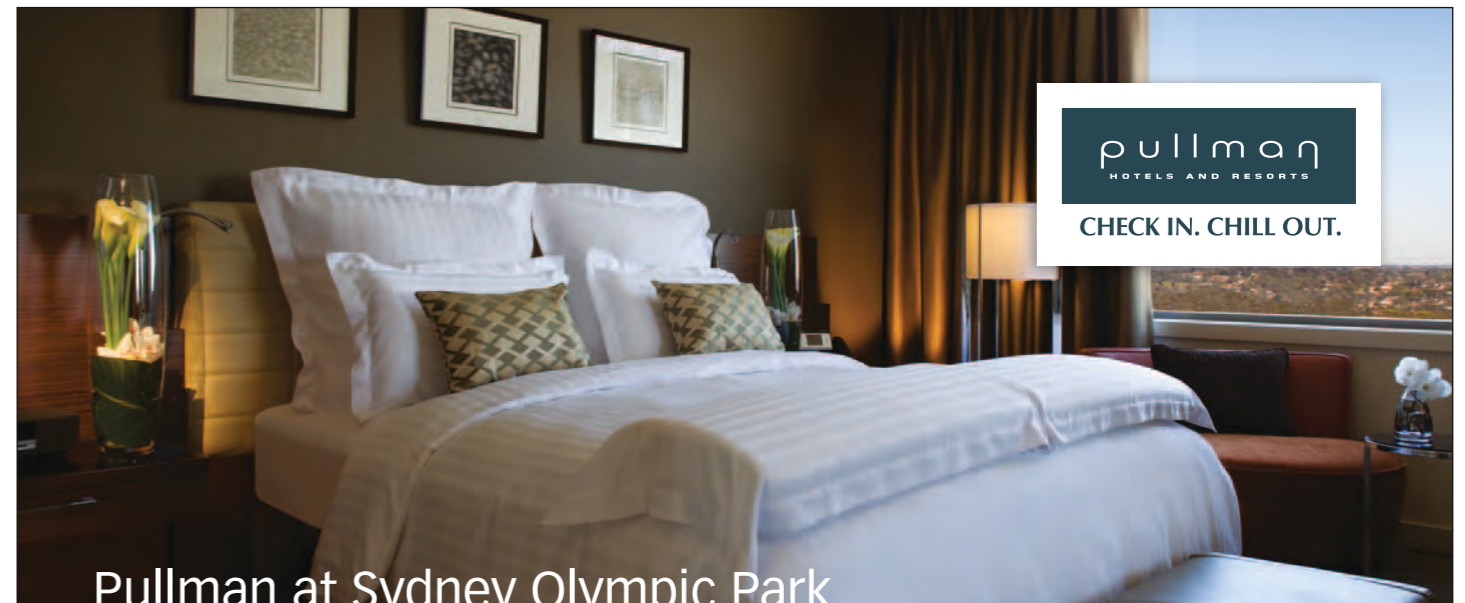
"I might sneak a few more Sydney Royal ribbons with the honey," he says. "We could get to a thousand. But what counts is that it's a Royal ribbon."



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