

Prodigy beats the master as big shears season opens - September 27, 2009

Gisborne teenager Joel Henare had to overcome mentor, idol and former three times World champion Joanne Kumeroa to retain his Waitaki McKenzie Merino Shears open woolhandling title as a new Shearing Sports New Zealand season started in Omarama on Saturday.

But he did it with some ease with a win by almost 20 points in a competition which attracted 29 open woolhandlers in the first step towards the selection of two people for New Zealand's team to defend the World woolhandling title at the Royal Welsh show next July.

Kumeroa, from Wanganui but based in Australia, ceded important time and fleece points to Henare who is set to become the youngest person to qualify for consideration for Master Woolhandler status in the current season, in which the best woolhandlers from separate series in the South and North islands will compete in a World Championships qualifying final at the 50th anniversary Golden Shears international Shearing and Woolhandling Championships in Masterton in March.

The top-ranked woolhandler in New Zealand last season, Henare cleaned-up the board almost nine seconds quicker than Kumeroa, and also had a substantial edge in his fleecework on the table as he repeated a win he scored when the event came out of recess last year. Third was Angelique Gage, of Christchurch.

The open shearing title was won by Invercargill gun Nathan Stratford, in the absence of reigning champion James Fagan, of Te Kuiti, who was in Australia competing in an invitation event at the Royal Perth Show.

Stratford was only fourth off the board in the six-man final over 10 sheep - one-and-a-half minutes behind first-man-off Eli Cummings, of Pleasant Point. But he effectively vanquished the opposition with the much-superior quality job to win with a clear margin of more than 14 points over runner-up Grant Smith, of Rakaia, with Cummings claiming third in a rare moment among top open-class placings.

The senior title was won by Far North gun Tipene Te Whata, starting his senior class career triumphantly after heading the national intermediate rankings last summer.

In Australia, Fagan was unable to match his winning start of a year ago as he and Hawke's Bay shearer Cam Ferguson were beaten narrowly by brothers Damian and Brendan Boyle in a historic transtasman challenge. The event was only made possible with the recent unification of Australian competition by West Australia's affiliation to Sports Shear Australia.

While Fagan was first off the board in the 12 sheep contest, comprising six merino wethers and six crossbreds, Ferguson had one of his biggest moments by taking individual honours overall. Both also tackled the Royal Perth Open, shorn only on merinos, and just missed on qualifying for the final.

All four shearers meet again in another transtasman challenge during New Zealand's only other merino competition, the national finewool championships, in Alexandra, next weekend.