

A WARM SOUL in a COLD CLIMATE

JOE MEYER – THE MAN BEHIND THE HORSE

Images courtesy of Julian Portch – julianportch@hotmail.com



By Linda
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T rue Grit and Determination have been the key to the success for Joe Meyer, Kiwi eventer based in Lingfield, Surrey. Not just your ordinary Joe, Meyer has worked and worked to achieve his dream and is delighted to have been chosen for the NZ 2012 Olympic squad.

In the peaceful surroundings of Churchill Stud, over a cup of

delicious coffee we chatted about his past and what the future holds for Joe and his horses.

Joe was brought up in the North Island of New Zealand where his family were very much involved with horses. His grandparents owned the highly successful Mamaku Stud and Joe was surrounded by, and involved with, horses from day one.

In order to further his career it was necessary for Joe to up sticks and move from New Zealand. Riding there is very limited and geographically it is too isolated to compete full time at international level. As Joe's grandmother was English he qualified for an ancestry permit so the move to the UK was an obvious choice. Joe believes that Britain is still revered as the Mecca of eventing and moved over here fourteen years ago, although New Zealand will always be his true home. Joe is not one to admire the British winters and favours climates with a little less cold and rain.

Joe is always on the lookout for new horses and owners and would look worldwide for the right horse. Coincidentally his most successful horses have all come from back home at Mamaku Stud. His ideal horse would be about 16.2hh (give or take an



inch or two) with good straight movement, lots of blood and the x-factor that makes a good four star horse.. I asked Joe, if he had the choice, past or present, what horse would be his choice? "Lucky for me it would be Snip" says Joe. "Every time I get on him I am reminded of how lucky I am. I am sure there might be some better horses out there, but not for me. Being a home bred makes him even more special."

I wanted to know what Joe thought about changes to eventing with less emphasis on speed and endurance and gearing more towards dressage. He says "This does not affect my choice of horse for eventing. If you are competing at novice or intermediate levels it can work well to have a more warmblood type of horse as the better natural movement can make it is easier

to obtain good marks in the dressage. However, if you are competing at the very top level the horse has to be good on the flat and still be able to gallop for a good twelve minutes, so therefore my choice of horse is still very much the same."

With regard to dressage, Joe likes to stick to fairly classical dressage training methods although as he says "over the years this has been very slightly tweaked." He currently trains with renowned dressage riders, Richard and Nicky Barrett and for jumping he travels over to Belgium about three times a year to attend a three day clinic with Albert Voorn, silver medallist at Sydney 2000. Joe likes to go there on his own and completely tunes into the training, it is his

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idea of total R&R. He met Albert about four years ago and at that time he helped Joe to get to grips with his wonder horse 'Snip'. Says Joe "I get on well with Albert so I find the trips both educational and great fun."

Every rider deals in a different way with pre-show nerves and Joe experiences what he calls "good nervousness."

"At two star level I do not really experience any significant nervousness but at a big event like Blenheim or Badminton I





ridden to Olympic Gold by Mark Todd at the 1984 Olympics. Two years later in 1986 he went on a family trip to the World Championships where Todd and Charisma only managed 10th place after a nasty fall at the water. Charisma and Todd went on to achieve another individual Gold at the 1988 Olympics and Team Bronze. The horse finished his days happily at Todd's farm at Cambridge, NZ and enjoyed a happy retirement until his demise at the age of 30.

Joe's believes that achievement at top level will only come from hard work and effort and for these very reasons he is inspired by people like Andrew Nicholson, his fellow kiwi team-mate. Joe says "Andrew has created a lot of good horses through hard work. He is always very helpful to other riders, and is willing to share his thoughts on a course with less experienced competitors. He is very dedicated and has the will to win. I also admire Pippa Funnell for the same reason." Joe is the first to admit he has come from a privileged background but it has not been an easy ride. For a long time he fought for recognition after arriving in the UK in 1996 thinking his success at home would be duplicated here. He was in for a shock; although able to perform well in each of the disciplines it just would not come together for him. It was in 2003 that he started to train with Richard Barrett, whom he credits with a breakthrough in his dressage performance, but he was still overlooked for Athens in 2004. Missing yet another Olympics after 8 years of trying was a bitter pill that Joe had to swallow and rise up from. Money was tight, luck was down but determination won the day and Joe was eventually picked for the Beijing Olympics 2008.

2009 saw safety issues brought to the fore in eventing. As a rider, I asked Joe if there was anything he would like to see improved upon. "There is" says Joe "Training. It is an underlying factor that people are not having enough training or lessons these days. Because of this they are not ready to go through the grades.. They are not able to correctly judge pace, rhythm and balance. If these things were improved upon then we would see great improvements in the safety. As a youngster I was as keen as any young rider, but I was told in no uncertain terms to slow down a pace. I asked the person who advised me 'would you mind helping me' and from that day on they acted as my mentor."

Joe is extremely attached to his horses; from his

◆ like to practice some tips that I have picked up from a sports psychologist that I work with. Before riding the x-country I will prepare by walking the course a number of times, I will then visualise riding it and completing with a clear round – my desired outcome. I will combine this image with my previous experience of successful rounds and focus on that feeling. It also helps to talk to someone who has already ridden the course in the same competition. One good rule of thumb is to only watch the first five to ten riders who go out on the course, since the first riders to go will be the two horse riders who are usually the most experienced."

Joe was showing and hunting back home from the age of six and was always encouraged by his grandparents. At the age of ten, after deciding he'd had enough of showing, he went on to pursue his main interest of jumping, then eventing just naturally followed. When Joe was just three years old his grandparents sold the Mamaku bred horse Charisma who went on to become one of the greatest event horses ever. Joe remembers watching TV while at school and seeing Charisma

“ Every time I get on him (Snip) I think 'How Lucky I am'. ”

first horse Southern Star, which he bought over with him from New Zealand and rode at both Burghley and Badminton, to his current horses. At Churchill Stud he has about seven of his own horses in the yard and amongst them is 'Snip'. Snip is a 17-year-old grey gelding, standing at a small but perfectly formed 16hh. and competed with Joe in Beijing in 2008. He is currently in work and will be taken to Badminton this year and then on to the 2010 World Games in Kentucky if all goes well. , Joe has also been named on the 2010 squad with Clifton Lush, owned by Frances Stead and Lucy Allison, and on the 2012 squad with Sanskrit from Mamaku Stud. As to the future for Joe, his personal aim is to go to Rio in 2016. He says "I think it would be great fun to go there and to compete, after that who knows, perhaps I shall look more at breeding horses. As for choice of home, maybe I shall get the Rio bug, or the warmer climes of Europe."

Joe is a great family man and proud father to his fifteen month old daughter 'Lexi'. He is not one to shirk duties and fondly talks of her days at playgroup and guess what? She has already sat upon a horse. These days at Churchill Stud, life is a

long way from his and Deborah's arrival in England with two suitcases and one horse in 1996. Costs do add up what with travelling and competition fees, tack and feed, also Joe is looking to buy another couple of horses to add to his existing team for 2012. However, finding a sponsor for a Kiwi rider in the UK is not always easy, as most will put their money to back a member of the UK squad – but then Joe has never been one to let obstacles stand in his way.

At NagMag we wish Joe and his team the very best of luck for 2012 and hope that he realises his dream of going on to represent his country in 2016 at Rio. Maybe then the Meyer family can settle to enjoy their horses together. NM

