

Olympic quest

LESLEY BAYLEY MEETS A COUNTRYSIDE MEMBER WHOSE OLYMPIC DREAM HAS COME TRUE

TRAINING: Joe Meyer takes his horse Snip through some dressage moves



Countryside member Joe Meyer has more than a passing interest in the Olympics in Beijing this month – for the event rider is actually taking part in this sporting spectacular! As the Olympic three-day event gets under way, Kiwi rider Joe Meyer will be fulfilling a long-term ambition – he'll be riding for his country in the ultimate equestrian competition.

Joe has already tasted the roller coaster of representing his country when he competed in the World Equestrian Games in 2006, but to reach the Olympics is the pinnacle – the result of a journey that began 12 years ago when he arrived in England to pursue an international eventing career.

After an inauspicious start, culminating in his horse failing to make it through the first veterinary inspection at the famous Burghley Horse Trials, Joe returned to New Zealand to collect his thoughts and decide what to do. It was during this time that he asked fellow Kiwi, Deborah McBrearty to marry him. In January 1997, only a few days after the wedding, Joe and Deb were heading back to England with Joe keen to recommence his international career.

'We've been here ever since,' said Deb, 'and we plan to at least stay on until the London Olympics, after which Joe will decide what he wants to do. He obviously wanted to ride in these Olympics, but he's also very

focused on the 2012 Games here in London.'

In the meantime, the couple have a home here at the stunning Churchill Stud, in Surrey. 'We have just under 20 acres,' explained Deb. 'It used to be part of the stud that Winston Churchill set up, but it has now been broken up into several pieces and our bit is Churchill Stud.'

At home the couple have 20 stables with 16 horses currently in work. Joe and Deborah own just under half of these horses in partnership with Joe's parents, while the rest are owned by clients. These horses are either ridden by Joe, or ridden by their owners with Joe's guidance. 'We have a great team here at the moment,' says Joe, 'but we're always on the look out for new talent.'

Although Joe does occasionally sell horses he has not made this a priority because his long-term ambition has always been to give himself the best possible chance of a successful eventing career and, of course, riding in the Olympics.

'I was shortlisted for the Athens games but did not make the final cut. Riding at the Olympics would be the ultimate for me,' said Joe. 'It's been my aim since I first started riding. As a young rider I did a lot of show jumping but the turning point came when I went with my parents to see the World Championships in Gawler, Australia, in 1986. I came home and said eventing is what I want to do.'

'My family all have horse

connections. Our farm is in New Zealand's hill country and we have cattle, sheep and horses. My mum used to event and my dad played polo, while my maternal grandparents were very into horses, with my grandfather being instrumental in setting up the NZ equivalent of the British Horse Society.'

His family have always been in the business of breeding horses and set up and run the world famous Mamaku Stud – a very successful stud producing NZ sport horses. The famous event horse Charisma – the double Olympic champion ridden by fellow Kiwi Mark Todd (also riding in the Olympics for NZ this year), came from this stud. When his grandparents sold Charisma, Joe was just a year old! The farm currently produces five or six foals a year and all Joe's horses have come from the stud.

Joe was in the enviable position of having two horses on the Olympic shortlist for this year: his greys, Snip and Ease on Fire, although Snip is now the named horse.

'Snip's a very genuine horse and is a stable favourite,' explains Joe. 'He had issues as a younger horse and I thought we were never going to get him to top-level competition. In fact, I almost gave him away so he could have a dressage career! However, he's proved us all wrong! He's a great little horse and very easy to do.'

Snip's highlight so far has been a seventh placing at Badminton Horse Trials last year – Joe is hoping that the horse's performance in the Olympics this month will do his NZ connections proud. Whatever happens in China this year, Joe will continue to work towards his goal of Olympic success.

While his parents are busy breeding the next generation of event horses, Joe and Deb have a family event of their own to look forward to.

In September, their first baby will be born – Deb is thankful that she should at least be able to fly out to the Olympics and is hoping that the baby doesn't make its appearance until Burghley Horse Trials is over!

Eventing explained

Eventing is often described as the ultimate equestrian sport. At the higher levels the competition takes place over four days – the first two days are devoted to dressage, then there's the second phase of the competition which is the demanding cross-country phase jumping over huge, solid obstacles over approximately a four-and-a-half mile course and then the third and final phase on the last day is show jumping. The competitor rides the same horse throughout the competition so to be in with a chance the horse has to be talented in dressage, cross country and show jumping. Horses are checked by vets before the competition starts and on the Sunday, before the show jumping. The leader board can look very different once the cross country has been completed – horses may not finish or may have problems along the way which add to their score. The penalties awarded against the horse for each section are carried through the competition and the one with the lowest score at the end of the competition is the winner. In the Olympics there are both team and individual honours to be won.