

Olympics

PREVIEW



above Joe on his Olympic ride Snip, who was bred at his family's Mamaku Stud

JOE Meyer has finally done it. He's got his wish and secured a spot on a Kiwi Olympic team. While some event riders propel themselves hastily to the pinnacle of their sport it has taken Joe a lot longer. A hell of a lot longer. As the lengthy, gritty, heart-rending, wallet-draining, emotional rollercoaster of a ride to the top was taking place it must have felt like a lifetime. In real terms it's more like a decade, give or take a few years, but during that seemingly unending time the downs outweighed the ups, the results were second-rate, Joe was something of a joke and he became compelled to look deep within as well as without to see why things were going so awry.

But look who's laughing now. Having reinvented himself, Joe can stand tall among

It's a wonderful life

his teammates — those awesome horsemen Toddy and Nicholson — knowing he has as good a chance as anyone of not making a dog's breakfast of Hong Kong. Now is payback time. If you put enough in you should get enough out and the Meyers have certainly invested heavily in the concept of Joe Meyer Event Rider. He shared the cost with his wife, Deborah, he says, whose lucrative job as a lawyer in the City helped to plug the (presumably considerable) shortfall left by Joe's horsey contribution — liveries, teaching and taking on other people's troublesome rides.

Some of Joe's problems stemmed from his upbringing in New Zealand. If a life can be too good, his was. In Joe's own words it was "charmed and privileged". All he ever wanted to do was ride and event (after a family trip to the 1986 Gawler World Championships), and that's virtually all he had to do, besides a bit of farm work to earn a crust. Just like James Bond collected beautiful women, Joe Meyer was a magnet for stunning, talented horses bred at his family's now world famous Mamaku Stud. He took on the young ones and got good results. What Joe didn't realise then was that good results in the small pond of New Zealand wouldn't equate with even the sniff of a rosette in the gigantic ocean of British eventing. But in 1996 Joe thought they did and he arrived in the UK with an advanced horse and an overpowering delusion that he was good enough to ride at the Atlanta Olympics.

"I really thought I was in with a chance, but in reality I didn't have a hope at all," says Joe. He tells the past like it happened, his honesty disarming, moving almost. The disappointment he felt is virtually tangible.

Kiwi Joe Meyer has just been selected for his first Olympics. Getting there has involved a long and expensive struggle to turn himself from an also-ran into a world class rider, as he reveals to **JULIE HARDING**

"I got frustrated in those early years [in the UK]. I knew I had the skills, but I couldn't get it together. I could ride the big tracks, but I couldn't get it all to come right at the same time. I struggled.

"I was completely ignored by the selectors. They already had their top end riders [Tait, Todd and Nicholson] who were expected to pull out whatever good horse they had at the time and win the next medal."

The turning point for Joe came in 2003. From just "muddling along", he structured his competition campaign and he employed Richard Barrett, husband of dressage's former British National Champion Nicky, as his dressage guru. But even though the transformation was startling, Joe was overlooked for Athens.

"Because we had thrown a lot of time and money into me, my riding improved and I got more horses and more clients. Athens was a bitter pill at the time, but that was partly due to my own naivety.

"I had a lot of fun, but those were hard years and there were times when I was trying so hard but had no idea how we were going to afford to do things.

"One of the worst moments of my life occurred when I had just filled my new lorry with diesel and found that none of my credit cards worked. I had to phone Deborah and use hers. It was a real low point finding that we were so stretched."

But Joe also had lucky breaks. One came in the form of Snip, the "wiry little ball of energy" he will ride in Hong Kong, discharging himself from the sicklist after three years spent mainly on the sidelines.

"I almost threw him away at one point," says Joe stretching the truth. Another endearing thing about this Kiwi is his passionate, almost childlike love for his horses. Once, he relates, when another leading light, Ease On Fire, suffered a serious leg injury in 2006 he was so upset that he didn't speak to anyone for two whole days. Southern Star, the first eventer he brought

WHAT, WHEN, WHY & HOW

WHAT drives you?

"The big events really motivate me, as well as competitions overseas. I love travelling."

WHEN did you take up eventing?

"It followed on from hunting and showing. When I was 10 I said that wasn't my bag and I wanted to jump. I was fearless. Eventing grew organically after show jumping."

WHY do you train with Richard Barrett?

"Richard has all the answers. When I'm scratching my head, he will sit on a horse and soon have the problem fixed."

HOW does it feel to have a famous stud in the family?

"Life isn't so bad when you can fly to the other side of the world and choose from a paddock full of horses."