

# Olympics 2008 PREVIEW



**above** Joe and Snip have notched up two top 10 placings at four-star level



## Leap

John Ridley, head of racing at the Hong Kong Jockey Club, began preparing for the Olympic equestrian events even before Beijing gave him the go-ahead. He tells **JULIE HARDING** about the organisational headaches and his soaring stress levels

**H**OW do you organise an Olympic Games — or, in this case, part of one? Answer: you find a dynamic human being with a penchant for planning and logistics, a motivator who has the ability to not only get things going, but who is able to shift goalposts if the need arises and sometimes move mountains too.

In the case of the equestrian events for the 2008 Olympic Games, this extraordinary, almost super-human human being is Australian John Ridley, the head of racing operations for the Hong Kong Jockey Club. He has had to move all manner of things, including dates, to get this particular show on the road. Imagine the recent Euro 2008 football championship with no final venue and a sign on the gate proclaiming “postponed indefinitely — facilities unfinished”. It’s unthinkable, but that

to the UK, is still with the Meyers, now a 22-year-old “pet”. That is one serious love affair with horses.

Athens taught Joe an unforgettable lesson. “I realised I had to do more so the selectors couldn’t not select me the next time.”

He did. He finished 10th at Badminton. Finally, emphatically, at long last, 14 years after his first trip to the UK, the Kiwi selectors could no longer bypass Joe Meyer. Everyone rooted for Joe and prayed for a fairytale result at the World Equestrian Games in 2006. It didn’t come. Following team orders and taking the tricky quick route, Joe and Snip went their separate ways at the influential final water complex within spitting distance of the finish.

Importantly, though, Kiwi top brass told Joe he had Done The Right Thing.

“I was reassured by management that they would rather see riders having a go than spending all day cantering round.”

Joe had another two years to ensure he did even more so that the selectors couldn’t not select him for Hong Kong. He was seventh at Badminton last year with Snip and this year, when all eyes were on him, third in a hotly-contested CIC\*\*\* at Chatsworth.

He was driving back from Longleat horse trials to his enviable base near Lingfield in Sussex when the longed for/dreaded phone call came. It was team manager Blyth Tait and the news was good.

But how do you celebrate something you have waited a lifetime for?

“I cracked open a bottle of champagne and Debs had a sip too.” Deborah is expecting the couple’s first child on 24 September.

“At first it was shock, horror,” says Joe on his feelings when he found out the Meyers would soon be a trio. “It wasn’t something we

planned in Olympic year, but now we are looking forward to it.”

Joe was still at school when Mark Todd won his first Olympic medal on Charisma, a horse bred at Mamaku Stud, set up by Joe’s late grandparents and these days run by his parents, Gay and John. Now Joe is on a team with the man who, like a phoenix, has risen from the ashes of retirement to stage the most extraordinary of all eventing comebacks.

“We all put Mark on a pedestal for what he’s done, but it feels right to have him on the team mainly because he’s such a personable guy, a really normal bloke.”

Joe will also be competing alongside another hero — Andrew Nicholson.

“I admire him for his work ethic, determination and achieving success on an endless list of horses. He is inspirational.”

For sporting success, Joe, a self-confessed “perfectionist with a positive outlook on life who doesn’t give up easily”, has to live in the UK, but New Zealand will always be home in his heart. His only unhappy times there came when he was ostracised at boarding school for his love of all things equestrian.

“People couldn’t understand riding. It wasn’t macho.”

At the end of a long, busy season, Joe and Deborah jet home, spending time with their families. Debs, whom Joe met 12 years ago at Badminton, is a native Kiwi. One day the couple plans to go back to the Southern Hemisphere to live. You can almost picture them, with children running around the place and Joe’s eventing medals, including one from London 2012, modestly tucked away in a drawer. He will have come full circle and returned to producing Mamaku horses. Of course by then he will already have lived his dream. ■