



Harry on Midnight Dazzler
competing at Badminton 2009

The main EVENT

Three-day eventer and Olympic hopeful, Harry Meade, counts Wills and Harry among his friends. Just don't expect him to talk about them, says *Alice Rose*

Some girls have all the luck. As Harry Meade – rising star of the equestrian world and hot prospect for Team GB at the London Olympics – shows me round his immaculate yard, it strikes me that hundreds of horse-mad Pony Clubbers would give anything to swap places with me. Their mothers and grandmothers, too – Harry is the son of triple Olympic gold medal winning eventer Richard Meade, a former beau of Princess Anne whose name still induces palpitations in ladies of a certain age. And it doesn't hurt that Harry's a close friend of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. Royal engagement speculation reached fever pitch last autumn when the couple were photographed arriving at Harry's wedding looking blissed-out after their holiday in Kenya – during which, it later transpired, the long-awaited engagement had taken place. (Less happily, it was at Harry's 22nd birthday party, with its 'natives and colonials' dress code, that Prince Harry turned up in Nazi uniform.)

But we'll get to all that later. When Roger from Rogers Taxis, Chippenham (no apostrophe; highly recommended next time you're down that way) drops me at Church Farm yard, Harry is executing impeccable dressage moves on a glossy bay called Tinkas Time. His pregnant wife, Rosie, comes to greet me carrying a freshly cut bunch of sweetpeas.



Friendly horses peer curiously from looseboxes, and a cheerful groom staggers towards us carrying two brimming water buckets. I seem to have landed in a Jilly Cooper novel. Harry and Rosie give me a tour of their equine charges – it feels like a particularly jolly drinks party, as I'm introduced to each horse in turn and given a rundown of their foibles and form. The star of the yard, Wild Lone, affectionately known as Alf, nuzzles my bag looking for Polos then swipes a mouthful from Rosie's bunch of sweetpeas. A Modern Duchess, the only mare in the yard, looks as though she's wearing pale pink lipstick. Tall Story, known as Fib, leans over to take a bite of my coat. Snipp the lurcher winds around our legs. It's hard to think of a more idyllic place to spend a sunny August afternoon.

Except that Harry would much rather be in Ireland ('Arland', he pronounces it), where he's had a hot tip about a new horse; when we go into the house, Rosie is despatched to look up flights to Cork, Dublin and Belfast. Bucolic it may look, but this is a slick business

operation and Harry spends every waking second working to keep the show on the road. It would be easy to judge him on his smart friends, plummy accent and Eton education, and on these glorious surroundings, but his 28-year-old shoulders bear huge responsibility.

Harry grew up at Church Farm, riding small, scruffy ponies with names like Tom Thumb and Munchkin. 'As a child, you want to be riding



Harry walks the course (above) and is pictured (below) with his wife, primary school teacher, Rosie

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something that is too fat and slow to run away with you,’ he says. He didn’t ride at Eton, but spent school holidays horsing around with six friends in the pony club. As the son of an Olympic medal winner, was he under huge pressure to follow in his father’s footsteps? ‘I always wanted to compete,’ he says, ‘but we didn’t grow up in a competitive environment – we had loads of fun. A lot of people have a very competitive upbringing and most of those end up giving up. Looking back, most of the people who end up making it are the ones who aren’t pushed at all and just enjoy it.’ Take note, pushy Pony Club Mummies.

At 18, Harry won the Pony Club Championship on a borrowed pony. Even at this young age, he approached the sport from a hard-nosed business perspective. ‘I had to be quite realistic about it from the start,’ he explains. ‘I knew that if this was what I was going to do, I was going to have to make a living from it, riding horses for other people, offering a service and sort of becoming a tradesman of the sport.’ When he left school, he rode a horse for free on the basis that he’d have a half share of the proceeds when it was sold. And with that money – ‘a few thousand pounds’ – he bought another horse, and so it began. His father encouraged him to go to university (he has a history of art degree from Bristol), pointing out that if he broke his back falling off a horse it would be useful to have another string to his bow. ‘It puts things into perspective,’ Harry says. ‘You meet friends who don’t know what eventing is and they’re the friends you ring up when you’ve had a really bad day. My best friend is an

accountant.’ (Sadly for royal gossip-hunters, he didn’t say, ‘My best friend is second-in-line to the throne.’)

He’s achieved a huge amount in a relatively short time: he was the youngest rider ever to have been awarded an armada dish for five Badminton completions, and completed more four-star international events by the age of 25 than any other rider. He patiently gives me a long sermon on the various levels of national and international competitions, drawing an explanatory table in my notebook (when he wins his Olympic gold, I’ll sell it on eBay for a fortune). ‘This is it in really simple terms,’ he concludes – you can see how he notched up five A-levels at Eton, four of them at grade A – ‘anyway, you now understand the entire qualification system – most riders don’t’. Three-day events, he says, are ‘like running a marathon – a longer distance and harder pressure on the horse, as well as all the work you’re doing on them at home, on the gallops getting them really fit,’ so he only puts horses in for two three-day events a year. The baby’s arrival at Christmas is well-timed to coincide with the off-season, when Harry and his horses have a well-earned break, mentally and physically, before they start gearing up for Badminton in the spring.

He and Rosie, a primary school teacher, clearly make an excellent

team and she must be brilliant with sponsors and owners. I ask how she can bring herself to watch him going over the huge cross-country fences. 'There's no doubt that it is a dangerous sport,' she says, 'but fortunately Harry's natural strength of the three stages is the cross-country, and he and Wild Lone are like poetry in motion. His top horse in the past was quite scary.' (Midnight Dazzler, who was retired earlier this year aged 20, had what Harry calls a 'chequered past' but came good eventually – he and Harry came tenth at Badminton in 2009 and eighth at Burghley in 2007). For Harry, the danger is less relevant than the fact that so much hangs on each round: 'One three-minute performance might sum up an entire season. If you go to the Olympics it's going to sum up that four-year cycle.'

Harry is resolutely matter-of-fact about his chances of being selected for the Olympics. 'If you're good enough, and you do everything right in your preparations, you'll be selected. And if you're not good enough or you don't do everything right in your training, you won't be. So it doesn't do a huge amount of good worrying. And if you don't go to London, there's Rio de Janeiro in 2016.' Longevity isn't a problem in this sport: New Zealander Mark Todd returned from retirement to win Badminton this year at the age of 55, and Mary King is still a stalwart of the British eventing team at 50. 'A lot of British riders have extended their careers so they can hang on for the London Olympics,' Harry says, 'so I think after that there'll be a sort of mass retirement.' The eventing fraternity sounds like a convivial bunch. 'There's a great camaraderie,' Harry says. 'In this sport, you're not directly competing against someone else in the way that you are in, say, tennis. You're competing against the course, so you avoid some of the rivalry of other sports. And the bigger the course, the more intimidating it is, so when you're walking the course, the more you'll be discussing it with your fellow competitors, brainstorming ideas. And in our sport if someone gets too cocky, the next minute they're sitting on their bum.'

His father still has a background role in the yard, helping to evaluate young horses and walking cross-country courses with Harry – 'he has a

very laid-back attitude and is totally the opposite of a pushy parent. I think one of the ways in which we work so well together is by identifying what really works and not trying to work in every department together.'

There's a lot more to this sport than swanning around in snowy white jodhpurs, and a large part of Harry's time is devoted to keeping his sponsors happy. He's teamed up with Hamptons to help promote their new equestrian property division – interestingly, equestrian property is more than holding its value in the current turbulent market conditions, and there is no shortage of buyers looking for stabling and facilities for everything from a few Thelwell ponies to a string of racehorses. 'It's a really good idea so it's easy to be genuinely excited about,' Harry says. 'It's simple: you're dealing with people who understand about horses, so they know what properties will and won't be useful. They don't just point to everything with a stable.'

Harry is always looking for new owners and sponsors, and the in-price is around £15,000 for an unproduced but potentially top horse. As Harry says, 'It's a lot less than owning a racehorse, and it involves a huge amount of fun – it's amazing how addictive and exciting it can be.' What he's really looking for, though, is a serious investor to help him run the business side of the yard. 'I bet there's somebody out there

whose wife and children would love it from a sporting point of view and who would enjoy the mentoring side of it. It's a pretty sound investment.' *Dragon's Den* wannabes, step this way. You'd be investing in a man of huge talent and character, with great courage and intelligence. And impeccable royal connections too, of course – just don't expect him to talk about them. When I mention Prince William, Harry and Rosie exchange glances. 'I can't say anything on that,' he says firmly. But you're friends from Eton, I prompt. 'No-' he starts, then stops himself. 'I really can't say. Not at all.'

Roger from Rogers Taxis drives me back to Chippenham station. 'Did you get a good story?' he asks. I tell him that I've had a lovely afternoon but that I didn't get much joy on the royal gossip front. He gives a satisfied chortle: 'No, you'll find we look after our own round here.' ■

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Harry showjumps Tinkas Time at Gatcombe Park earlier this year