

# 'Every little thing matters'



Badminton winner Jock Paget has come a long way from being a bronco-riding bricklayer a decade ago. Martha Terry visits him at home and finds he's the ultimate professional

**J**OCKPAGET is not as cool as he looks. Yes, he's tanned, tall and athletic, but when I meet him in a field in Surrey, he's banging on about grass.

Not exactly the secret weapon I was expecting from the Badminton winner. But he persists, waxing lyrical about fertilisers and specialist seed, and the effect the ensuing blades have on his horses' coats.

It is this attention to minute detail that has moved Jock up from a promising unknown who was flirting with the podium at major championships to four-star winner.

Jock, 29, was already a significant rider in his native New Zealand before moving to England in 2010. He had five horses qualified for London 2012. But his meeting with successful businessman Joe Giannamore, who owns Jock's 10-box yard, has given him a vital boost.

"He's taught me that every little thing matters, even the grass," Jock says. "If you look at Badminton, I was 1 sec inside the time and won by 0.3 pen."

## Early days

A decade ago, the longest Jock spent on a horse at a time was 8sec of bronco riding — which he did for fun and says he "wasn't much good". But, jaded by the repetitiveness of his bricklaying job, Jock decided to take a year out to work with horses.

He wanted to work in Europe but, with no experience, his best option was a working

pupilage in his adopted country of Australia with leading rider Kevin McNab.

"He said he'd train me to advanced in three years," says Jock. "I didn't intend to do horses for that long, but I thought that was cool, and I loved the way horses went for him."

Jock surpassed Kevin's predictions. He finished fourth at his first three-star, on a horse he'd produced from scratch — in less than two years.

"[Trying three-star] was like bungee jumping — we thought let's go for it, and Kev thought I could take a knock if it didn't work out," Jock says.

That competition was the first time Kevin had allowed Jock to take up a contact before a fence — and that soft-hand style has perpetuated to this day.

"I wasn't allowed to touch their mouths when I started," says Jock. "I didn't have great

balance and I'd learnt to ride with my legs out and forward like a bronc rider.

"For ages, all Kev let me do was trot round a field with flapping reins, trying to get my lower leg underneath me."

But he trotted and trotted and trotted, sometimes for 5hr a day, round and round that field. Later, he would ride 15 horses a day, followed by an hour's hilly bike ride. It was as if he was making up for his late start.

"If Kev said we were leaving for an event at 4am, I'd be up riding at 1am," he says. "I had to feel I was doing more than anyone else."

What seemed like a chance phone call from a stranger propelled Jock from struggling to set up a yard with one horse into the busiest event rider in the southern hemisphere.

Former L'Oreal country manager Frances Stead had set up Clifton Eventers with the aim of sourcing top young horses and pairing them with talented New Zealand riders. Eight of her horses have represented their country at championships, with six different riders.

Jock had little clue of her credentials, but the Australian equestrian industry was in lockdown due to an equine influenza outbreak and he thought it was worth a punt.

"She said she had this amazing horse, called Clifton Promise," says Jock. "I thought, 'That's what they all say, it's probably a goat.' Yet he's become the reason behind almost every decision I've made in the past five years."

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Jock Paget on his early eventing days with Kevin McNab



Jock working the promising 10-year-old Chequers Play The Game



Clifton Promise: 'You can't tell him to do anything, you have to have a conversation'



Jock flies a fence on Chequers Play The Game, who will head to the World Equestrian Games test event this summer

'He's the ultimate gentleman' PROMISE was nine then and still a novice. When Frances spotted him as a gangly three-year-old, she knew he'd take six years to mature.

And he progressed rapidly under Jock, winning a CIC\*\* on their fourth outing together. Jock credits those who brought Promise on slowly, but it's clear their bond is extraordinary.

Jock brushes it off. "I don't know why we get on," says Jock, but his eyes light up. "You can't tell him to do anything, you have to have a conversation. But he's the ultimate gentleman."

Nor can you tie Promise up — he's flipped over twice on concrete — and he gets bored easily. Chunky wooden name-blocks hang at every paddock and as we stand by his, Promise

saunters up sociably — booted, rugged and fly-masked like some Star Trek apparition.

The otherwise immaculate grass is scarred by a worn track round its perimeter. After two weeks off, the Badminton champion is saying it's time to get back to work.

"He walks and walks when he's been out too long," says Jock. "He only goes out after a three-day or galloping — he can be wild otherwise."

So how has Jock nurtured this highly strung character?

"It's been years of training, with a couple of major turning points," Jock says. "I remember him crashing through a grid [of showjumps] on a long rein for a whole week and I let him make a million mistakes.

"One day he stopped. I gave him a big pat and



Wooden blocks by each field denote the occupants, while each horse has his own folder of information

put him in his stable. It was the first time he'd actually looked."

The next day, Jock gradually rebuilt the grid and has never had to repeat the exercise. He also has a policy never to be competitive at one-days.

"Looking at his record, you'd think he's rubbish," says Jock. "I do transitions throughout the dressage [within the pace] and score fours. Cross-country, I pull him up after every fence. He has to wait for me — now I can ride him on the buckle, which is how I like it."

In the run-up to Badminton, Jock fine-tuned Promise's preparations.

"I rode and fed him four times a day," he says. "First a hack up to the church, then some food, then trotting in the school, then grass, then up a hill, then food, then maybe some poles — and more food.

"As long as he's working and eating, he's stoked. Loves it."

**'I work smarter now'**

IT'S easy to think Jock's a laid-back Kiwi/Australian (his accent's a mix, his girlfriend's an Aussie and he describes himself as a mongrel). But this belies a calculated, analytical character. He's a consummate professional, striving to perfect every aspect of his operation.

Michael Jung seemed invincible, until Jock asked to train with him and beat him. He used to bike 20km a day, but since splitting his chin open trying to beat his own time, he now does three targeted workouts a week with a personal trainer. Where he rode 15 horses a day and taught five more, now he's cut the hours to



Clifton Promise enjoys the grass after Badminton, but he can be wild when turned out

**Jock Paget on:**

**Seeing a stride:** I used to miss all the time until I realised it was doable. We can all be 100% accurate. You just need to be able to find a gear and hold it, then adjusting the distance is a piece of cake.

**Australia's equine influenza outbreak:** It wiped out everything for a year. But for me it was lucky — it meant I took the job in New Zealand with Frances.

**His lucky whip:** I had a lucky whip, but I lost it before Badminton. I have a new lucky whip.

**A shipshape yard:** Every tiny detail matters, from washing the trucks weekly to the grass they eat. And each horse has a booklet with targets, schedules and graphs.



Jock's 10-box yard is owned by businessman Joe Giannamore, who has helped him work out how to get the edge



A cat gets into the action, as Jock makes plans with two of his team, Anke Hoyer and Hollie Swain

develop more quality work.

"For way too long, I worked too hard," he says. "I don't work less hard, I work smarter. I earn a lot less money now, but it's paying off."

Frances, who sent her five top horses to England with Jock and now lives in south-east France, said that while the rider's talent stood out in the raw, his attitude is exceptional.

"Jock is a sponge — always absorbing and wanting to learn new ideas," she says. "And he's one of the few riders I've seen who can instantly put a suggestion into practice."

Jock is aware of the leg-up Frances gave him: "I couldn't have done anything without her. She's like a second mother. I had no money, no horses; she gave me a car and a home. And she has a freaky knack of spotting a horse."

A decade ago, city boy Jock had never jumped a fence. What is next?

"I want to go to every four-star with one capable of winning and one building mileage," he says. "Bullet Proof could win Luhmühlen next month. And I'd like to be champion of the world, that sounds good."

And after the next World Championships, alongside Clifton Lush and Bullet Proof, Promise will be primed for Rio 2016, although he will technically be 18.

"His way of going doesn't put much stress on his body — he's uphill and light on his feet," says Frances. "Jock and I joke that he's still maturing. Maybe at 20 he'll be at his peak." **H&H**

**Clifton Eventers**

FRANCES STEAD was a rider herself before family, work and competing became too much of a squeeze. She is now known as the "Carrot Lady" to her many Clifton-prefixed horses.

"I wasn't a good rider anyway," says Frances, who was born in England but moved to New Zealand in her 20s.

But she had developed a superb eye for a young horse, and — with a decent salary from L'Oreal — set up Clifton Eventers with the aim of finding top-class horses to be ridden by talented riders, with no pressure to sell.

At the operation's peak, she was running up to 20 horses at all levels, keeping the very best.

She believes she can spot potential from the outset — in both horse and rider — and earmarked Promise out as a winner from day one, knowing it would take years before he had developed enough to be put under pressure.

She favours the New Zealand thoroughbred for the top level.

"They're tough, athletic and have wonderful temperaments, with quick brains, and will always gallop," she says.



Seeing talent in the raw: Clifton Promise at three