

How I got started

Carl Hester

Did you come from a horsey background?

I have no horses in my family background at all but I was brought up on the island of Sark where horses are a way of life and used on the farms and for transport.

If not, what made you want to start riding?

There were no such things as riding horses on Sark they were all carriage horses - heavy cob types. The island always shut down on a Sunday and we used to take the horses swimming on the beach so riding started as a fun thing. At 16 I was still small - around 5ft 4" - and wanted to be a jockey. I applied to Newmarket and they didn't accept me. Some people who had a holiday home on Sark had an equestrian centre in the New Forest and they invited me to go and train for my BHSAI. When I was 17 I started growing and was soon 6ft so I would have been too big to be a jockey anyway.

What was your earliest riding experience and how old were you?

When I was about nine I used to work on a farm after work and they brought me a donkey to do all the errands on. So I started riding on a donkey for three years and then they brought me a slightly smaller version of a cob. Riding on Sark was all bareback so when I came to England at 16 I had to learn how to put a saddle and bridle on and ride properly.

What was the name of the first pony you learnt to ride on?

A donkey called Jacko.

Where did you learn to ride?

At the age of 16 at the Fortune Centre in the New Forest.

Who was your first riding teacher?

I was trained by several instructors at the Fortune Centre, including Suzanne Derek, who trained me for eventing. My first dressage trainer was Dr Bechtolsheimer, who I went to work for in 1989 when I was 22.



When did you get your first pony / horse and what was its name?

I didn't have my own horse until I was 20. I was going to go back to the Channel Islands, as I didn't think I could make a life with horses and I saw this advertisement from Jenny and Christopher Taylor in Moreton-in-Marsh, who were producing event horses and needed a rider. I got the job and bought my first horse from one of their friends - a bay gelding called Limmy's Comet. He was a warmblood thoroughbred cross, bred locally and very naughty. I sold him to Vanessa Ashbourne, who had won gold in the European Young Rider Championships, and the horse went on to win Blenheim with Rodney Powell.

Were you a member of a pony club? If so, which one?

West Hants Pony Club. I was in all three teams - dressage, show jumping and eventing.

Did you have a horsey hero when you were growing up and if so who was it?

Not really as I never read about horses or had magazines so I didn't know any riders. Once I started riding at the top level, Isabel Werth became my dressage heroine and I was fortunate to work with Mark Todd, who is a legend.

What was your first competition experience?

Riding a Prelim test at the Fortune Centre - they used to have a dressage competition once a month.

Who was your greatest inspiration / influence as a young rider?

Jenny and Christopher Taylor - they picked me up when I was going to go back to Sark. They specialised in buying difficult horses and producing them and three Olympic horses had already come out of their yard. I learnt more about being a horse person from them - how to deal with difficult horses and the importance of not giving up.

Was there a point when you knew you wanted to be a top rider? How old were you?

I had been working for Dr Bechtolsheimer for about six months and was riding at the selection trials in March 1990. On the first day I didn't ride very well in the warm up classes and suddenly realised the opportunity I had been given. The next day I went back and rode like a totally different person because I wanted to do it so badly and I knew I had been given the chance of a lifetime. Three months later I was on the World Championships team.

What has been your greatest moment?

With Escapado, who was my horse of a lifetime. He was so difficult as a young horse and when he was 12 I was 3rd in the European Championships on him to Anky van Grunsven - another of my heroines. It was a very special moment.

What has been your lowest point?

Leaving Dr Bechtolsheimer in 1993. I had done World Championships, European Championships and Olympic Games and I assumed that I would walk straight into another job but I had to start all over again. I couldn't believe that no-one was there to help and pick up the pieces. But that's when I learnt about hard work and drive.

Was there ever a point at which you considered giving up?

No - apart from in the early days when I decided to go back to Sark and that was just laziness really. All my friends were just leaving college and having a great time back on Sark and I was in England working until 9.30pm every night and had no social life so I thought I'd go home.

Was there ever a point at which you considered giving up?

You're never good enough in dressage - you never achieve 100% or even 90% - so there is always a long way to go. I love watching horses change, understanding them and realising that what you get as a four year old may be very different at ten. I enjoy the training - the competition is the glory but job satisfaction at home is more important than ever.

If you were not a dressage rider what would you have been?

Working in the tourism industry in Sark.

What advice would you give an aspiring dressage rider?

People get very obsessed with how much it costs to buy and train a dressage horse but there are people out there who will help you if you have talent and an approachable personality. If you want to be a dressage rider, a trained horse can teach you faster than anything but it is possible to make it by training your own horse. The best advice I was given was buy your own horse, even if you can only afford a two year old and train it yourself. If it doesn't turn out to be good enough you can sell it and buy another one.