

How I got started

Michael Whitaker

Did you come from a horsey background?

Yes – we were a farming family and there were always horses and ponies about.

What made you want to start riding?

My brother John is five years older than me and I suppose I followed his lead. He was already doing very well in competitions when I was about 10. Call it sibling rivalry but I wanted to do that too and I wanted to beat him.

Was there a lot of pressure on you to ride professionally or would you have been encouraged to take up another career?

There was no pressure at all for me to ride, I just wanted to do it. And if I'd wanted to do something else I would have been encouraged to take up another career.

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

I can't really remember starting – I was probably around three years old. From eight or nine onwards I probably rode every day.

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

Hercules – a little Shetland pony.

Where did you learn to ride?

Just at home on the farm. We didn't go to any riding centres or anything like that.

Were you a member of the pony club.

Yes - Rockwood Harriers just outside Huddersfield.

Who was your first riding teacher?

Mum – Enid Whitaker.



First professional trainer?

Lars Sederholm when I was about 16 – down at Waterstock in Oxfordshire.

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

The Shetland pony Hercules, when I was three.

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

Harvey Smith – he was the really big name at the time.

What was your first competition experience?

I really can't remember because I started that young. I was going to shows from five onwards.

What was the first one you can remember and why was it important to you.

The first time I remember jumping in competition was when I was about seven. It was great because I jumped clear but I'm not sure exactly where it was; probably a Yorkshire pony club show. That was when I got bitten by the bug that made me want to do a lot more competing.

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

It has to be John [Whitaker] because I saw more of him than anyone else and he was good. Harvey Smith's got to be another one. I wasn't trained by him but he was always there and happy to give you a bit of advice if you needed it; always good with the young riders. David Broome as well; he and Harvey were the ones winning most things at the time. I used to watch all the better riders and draw inspiration from them.

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

I never thought I'd do anything else – never had any doubts; I knew I could do it and just got on with it. Every day is different and I still really enjoy it.

What has been your greatest moment?

It's got to be in 1991 – Rotterdam European Championships. John was first, I was second and we won team gold as well. That was great.

What has been your lowest point?

It has to be the last Olympics (2008) when my horse was lame and then John's horse went lame as well – that was a pretty low point.

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

Not really, no. You obviously get down sometimes when things don't go right but no, I've never thought about giving up.

What do you like most about show jumping?

Every day's different, you never know what's round the corner. I'm still very competitive – I love the competition. There's a lot of satisfaction in finding a young horse you think is going to be very good and it turns out to be – that's very rewarding.

If you were not a show jumper what would you have been?

Probably a farmer – sheep and cattle. It's too cold to grow anything up here in Yorkshire.

What advice would you give an aspiring show jumper?

You can't buy success – well you can to a certain extent but it's really down to hard work. There's no point in having a good horse if you can't ride it. So be prepared to put in the hours and the hard work and take the knocks. You really have to like horses as well – it's not just sport and they're not machines.