

INTERVIEW



Piggy in the medals

Event rider **Piggy French** made her mark with an individual silver medal at this year's European Championships. She talks to Victoria Spicer

Like many pony mad little girls, Piggy French was obsessed with eventing. Her formative years were spent watching her idols compete, camera in one hand and an autograph book in the other. She kept scrapbooks, and saved the videos of all the big three-days. "I was a proper eventing geek," she confesses wryly.

The difference is that, unlike the majority of those little girls, Piggy grew up to be one of the heroines that eventing fans flock to see. She's come a long way, from spectator to European silver medallist.

A fun upbringing

Those early years obviously cemented her enthusiasm for the sport, but back then Piggy was more concerned with capturing her heroes on film, than emulating their feats.

"There were certain people I liked to watch, like Ginny Elliot and Lucinda Green, and Mary King was my absolute idol," says Piggy. "My mum introduced me to her at a three-day event when I was little, and I was completely starstruck. After that, I would write to her and she always replied. I drew King William's head for her many times."

Piggy's two sisters rode, her mum evented to Advanced level, while her grandmother hunted and was involved with carriage driving. But despite the ultra-horsey family background, the ethos was about fun.

"We did every Pony Club activity and lots of hunting, but riding was

always just a hobby. I never thought I'd end up as a rider.

"I enjoyed galloping around fields and jumping, but I didn't take it seriously," says Piggy, whose real name is Georgina – her nickname was given to her by her sister, who thought her sibling resembled Piglet from Winnie the Pooh.

For a while, it seemed that Piggy's fondness for art might take precedence over horses. "At school, I wasn't academic – and I had the GCSE results to prove it – so it didn't take too much persuasion for my parents to let me leave," she says.

"I went to college for a term, studying art and photography, but it was a waste of time and money. I wanted to ride, and I knew I could pick up a paintbrush at any stage in my career."

From a hobby to a career

By that time, riding was becoming somewhat less of a 'hobby'. She had won the Pony Club eventing championships on board Lloyds Gamble, on whom she also finished second in the Junior Regional Novice (JRN) championships.

Piggy had discovered her latent competitiveness. "The more I won, the more I wanted to win," she says.

"The transformation of Lloyds Gamble excited me. Even now, whenever I see a horse, I think he might not look the best, move the best, jump the best, or be that careful, but I know I can get the biggest kick out of improving him."

Based at her parent's yard in Norfolk, Piggy began to earn money working with horses. "I started out with event rider Justine Ward – I was one of the worst grooms she's ever had," she smiles.

"After that, I was freelancing – I mucked out and tacked up for other people for a tenner here and there, and occasionally people would ask if I'd take their horse to a hunter trials that weekend. From there it all started to mount up."

That was how she got the ride on Flintlock II, who belonged to a friend who was doing A-levels. Her friend's mum asked Piggy to keep the gelding going, and the pair ended up reaching four-star level.

Ups and downs

In 2005, Piggy made the move to Leicestershire to share a rented yard with her then-boyfriend, Oliver Townend. Both were racing up the ranks of the sport, and for a couple of years, the partnership worked well. However, rapid expansion began to take its toll.

"Both of us were expanding our yards, and Oliver had to rent another



Above: Piggy and Some Day Soon en route to individual silver at the European Eventing Championships.

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Piggy, an elegant and effective rider, schools Chicago.



Heading down to one of the paddocks at her Leicestershire base.

PIGGY'S FIVE TO REMEMBER



LLOYDS GAMBLE

"He gave me the hunger for eventing and winning. He wasn't a 'made' pony, but he took me through JRN level and to the Pony Club Championships."



FLINTLOCK II

"He was a normal type with a heart of gold, and he took me from Novice level to Badminton – every time we stepped up a level, he just kept going. It was a real fairy-tale story."



DONE TO ORDER

"He was a little dun cob, just 15.2hh, and yet he jumped one of only three double clears at Burghley in 2005. He will always be very special to me."



SOME DAY SOON

"This is the horse who helped me to win silver at this year's European Championships. He's a great big horse – 17.2hh – but he's really shy and scared of life."



FLYING MACHINE

"The most naturally talented horse that I've got, he's really trainable and he loves to work. If all goes well, he's a definite contender for the 2012 Olympics."

yard nearby to keep his 'overflow'," Piggy explains. "He was about to have to rent a third place, so I said I'd find somewhere locally. I moved to a lovely yard last year, and that seemed to work alright."

"But then Oliver bought a place of his own, which had always been his ambition, and it had the right amount of stables for his horses..." she trails off.

When Oliver moved away, Piggy returned to the yard that they had previously shared. "I was on my own, and decided I needed to use this time to do something for myself," she says.

"I kept my head down, focused on my riding, worked on my team of horses, and it's all fallen into place. Sometimes with horses, everything you touch goes wrong – but this year things just went my way."

However difficult a time it has been emotionally, both Piggy and Oliver's careers have bloomed from successful to stratospheric. Oliver notched up back-to-back wins at Badminton and Burghley, and he's just headed the HSBC FEI Classics series.

Piggy, meanwhile, achieved her lifelong ambition of being selected for a senior team. Notably, her place on the European Championships squad came about as the result of the withdrawal of her childhood heroine, Mary King.

"I was on the reserve list but I thought I didn't have a chance, as I didn't have the results at four-star," Piggy admits. "When Yogi [Breisner, the British team's chef d'équipe] rang to tell me at Burghley, all I could think to say was, 'Are you taking the piss?'"

A sterling performance

Three weeks later, Piggy arrived in France with Some Day Soon. "He was so excited when he arrived at Fontainebleau, and he took a few days to settle down," she says of her 17.2hh gelding. "He's a hot horse, and difficult to keep settled, so that was a concern for the dressage."

Although her selection had been a surprise, the competitive side of Piggy kicked in. "I didn't want to go out there and make a prat of myself.



Some Day Soon (left) and future superstar, Flying Machine.

PIGGY ON...

Why she's wary of skiing

"I went skiing for the first time last year. I would recommend having some lessons beforehand, but I didn't bother. Cue me ending up in a spectacular snowball cartwheel during which I lost my skis, sticks, gloves, hat and phone. Thankfully, I didn't break any bones! It was a great holiday though."

Picking up a paintbrush again

"When I walk past an art shop and see canvas boards and paints, I still have this little glimpse of yearning. But you need the time and patience for painting, you can't just do it now and then. But I will come back to it at one point."

Her post-Europeans mail

"When I came home from the Championships, I liked receiving post – I got congratulations cards, flowers and bottles of Champagne. It was like Christmas every day!"

Her love of show jumping

"I'd love to ride around the Hickstead Derby course – I love big outdoor shows, with huge fancy arenas and massive jumps. But indoor shows, with all those fences in an arena the size of a postage stamp, would scare me!"

Why riding comes before partying

"I'm no good after a big night out if I have to ride a dozen horses. It makes me a little bit scratchy if I'm hungover, and I don't like trying to work my horses when I'm not in the right frame of mind."

The importance of friends

"I love spending time with my friends, and I don't get enough time to see them. I have a close bunch who've been good mates to me, especially over the past few years. I hope I've been half as good a mate to them as they have to me."

I'd been given this amazing chance, and there were probably a few people questioning my selection, because I hadn't had the horse that long and he hadn't had the best results.

"As we went in to do our test, he seemed to have a bit of presence about him, like he knew it was a special moment. So I tried to stay chilled, because if I get uptight, he picks up on it."

The strategy worked. "I glanced up at the scoreboard during the trot work, which is his weakest pace, and the three scores were 7, 8, 8 – and I thought, bring it on!" Piggy recalls.

"It gave me the confidence to relax and really ride the test. I was so proud of him. He'd never produced such good work at home – it was the test of his life."

The cross-country course wasn't easy for a huge horse like Some Day Soon. "He's big, and the course was

twisty and up and downhill, so it felt uncomfortable," she says.

They went into the final day – her favourite phase – in fourth place, with just one show jump separating the second to fourth placed riders.

Piggy put the pressure on those above her by jumping clear. "I've struggled with his show jumping, because he can get spooky and tight, and he didn't jump particularly well in the morning," she says.

"But then we had a couple of good jumps before we went in, and that was it – he jumped an absolute corker of a round."

When the third and second placed riders both had fences down, Piggy realised she had won an individual silver medal, something that had seemed utterly out of her grasp. "It meant so much – I shouldn't have even been there, and yet I was, and I had won a medal," she recalls.

Full of ambition


Some Day Soon is now out in the field, enjoying a well-earned rest. He shares his paddock with Flying Machine, the horse Piggy hopes will take her to the 2012 Olympics. He's already notched up an impressive record – from their nine starts in 2009, they've had four wins, a second, a third, a fifth and a ninth.

Piggy will spend the winter working her horses, selling some of the youngsters, and generally plugging away. One day, she would like to have a husband and children, but for now, there is plenty more she wants to achieve in her career. A silver medal is just the beginning.

"You can work hard and have a successful year, but then you've still got to sell good horses that you've worked hard to bring on, because you've got to keep going. Prize money alone isn't enough to live on," she says. "But maybe I'll win Badminton next year, and that will make all the difference!"

She says it jokingly, but the odds of Piggy picking up that winner's cheque must be shortening rapidly.

Equally likely is that she'll be the first rider that all the pony mad girls flock towards at events, expressions hopeful, autograph books in hand.

But don't for a minute expect that it will go to her head. "When people ask for my autograph, I can't help think – but it's just me?" she shrugs, proving that while piggies might fly, this lady has her feet firmly on the ground. 



'Popping' over a vast hedge at home on board Chicago.

PIGGY'S TIMELINE

● 1980

Born in Norfolk on 12 August

● 1995

Starts eventing aged 15 with Lloyds Gamble

● 2001

Wins Young Rider team gold with Flintlock II

● 2003

Makes her Badminton debut with Flintlock II, finishing 31st

● 2004

Crowned under-25 champion at Bramham

● 2006

Wins £25,000 for the Shropshire Grand Slam, having won Weston CCI two-star twice and Sansaw Park CCI two-star

● 2007

Wins Le Lion D'Angers seven-year-old championships with Castaway II. Comes 12th at Burghley with Paris

● 2009

Takes individual silver medal at the European championships, riding Some Day Soon