

Olympic experiences shared

Three Team GB owners share their experiences of London 2012 and tell us about their hopes for the future.

At a glance:

Lionheart (Lion)	owned by Judy and Jeremy Skinner; ridden by William Fox-Pitt
Miners Frolic (Henry)	owned by Sarah Pelham, Nicholas and Valda Embiricos; ridden by Kristina Cook
Opposition Buzz (Dodie)	owned (and bred) by Rosemary Search; ridden by Nicola Wilson

‘We didn’t think we would go. William [Fox-Pitt] had three potential Olympic horses and we weren’t top of the list,’ laughs Judy Skinner, owner of Lionheart along with her husband Jeremy. In fact, they were so convinced that he wouldn’t be selected that they went on holiday, only to return the day before the event started. On reflection, Judy thinks this was no bad thing. ‘Although we missed the team training it meant that we didn’t have a lot of time to worry either!’

During the event itself, Judy experienced conflicting emotions. ‘It was hugely exciting on the one hand, but then you felt a massive sense of responsibility for both the team and rider.’ This was Judy’s first time as an owner of a team horse. ‘I felt incredibly privileged to have my horse chosen. To experience the Olympics in our own country just doubled the experience. My eventing buddies were all there, so I felt cocooned by lovely people, which made it a wonderful difference.’

The Olympics are a very different event to others in that there are strict rules that have to be followed, particularly in terms of access to the horses and riders. ‘The Olympics weren’t really designed with an ‘owner’ in mind’ explains Judy. Despite this, Judy managed to catch up with William and Lionheart behind the scenes as well as watch all three phases from the venue. ‘I am so proud of Lionheart. We were blown away by his dressage, but disappointed about his crosscountry performance.’ Lionheart seemed to run out of steam across the country, which resulted in time penalties. ‘He’s never not made the time before or minded hills. We were completely shattered about that, not just for us, but for the team and William.’

Lionheart is now enjoying a rest after a tough season. ‘It’s been a flat afterwards’ says Judy, who has been enjoying watching her grandchildren event. As for the future, ‘I haven’t even thought about that yet. I would love him to come out and have a good run next season and I’m sure we will aim for a CCI4*.’

For Sarah Pelham, co-owner of Kristina Cook’s Miners Frolic, this was her second Olympic experience, but getting there hasn’t been easy due to Miners Frolic contracting colitis last

year, which left him fighting for his life. Sarah's London 2012 experience was all the more special as a consequence. "It was totally amazing" says Sarah. "Beijing felt a very long way from home and of course, we were separate from the actual Olympics, so you didn't feel a part of it, but at London you did. Everyone was gunning for the British team." Sarah's accreditation pass caused a lot of interest from people as she walked around the venue. "Spectators would come up to me and say how much they loved Miner's Frolic! It makes you realise that you are a tiny cog in such a huge event."

Sarah's proudest moment was watching Miners Frolic cross the finish line after the crosscountry. "Kristina couldn't stop him!" Then he jumped clear showjumping. "The prize giving made me cry – in fact, there was quite a lot of weeping overall"

Henry, as he's known in the stable, is now at home with Sarah, and they are both enjoying quite a celebrity status around the village. "When I walk the dog, people come up to me and ask how my wonder horse is! The children want to come and see him and give him carrots," she laughs. He's even been known to pose for the odd photo too.

Henry is now rising 15 and Sarah feels he is coming to the end of his career. They are taking the future day by day but Sarah hopes he will make it to Badminton 2013. "Everything is a bonus with him and we don't put any pressure on Kristina or Henry." Whatever happens, Henry will spend his retirement at home with Sarah. "He's done so much and given me such an amazing journey. He's priceless."

Like Judy, getting a team place was also a surprise for Rosemary Barlow, owner and breeder of Nicola Wilson's Opposition Buzz. The pair was selected when Piggy French had to drop out due to injuries to both her horses. "We were so disappointed not to be chosen initially, and then when we were picked we were on such a high but also sad for Piggy. I get such a tingling down my neck and spine whenever I talk about the Olympics," says Rosemary, who describes it as 'the most wonderful experience of my whole life'. Being in London made it even more special.

A highlight was watching Opposition Buzz, or 'Dodie' as he's affectionately known, fly round the cross country. Although she trusted him to go clear, Rosemary felt the need to watch his round on her own. "I hid under a tree near Fence 5 so that I could see the big screen as well" she explains. Rosemary kept herself calm by explaining the rules of eventing to nearby spectators who wanted to learn more about the sport. Her proudest moment was watching Nicola receive her medal. "I'm nearly in tears now thinking about it. Opposition Buzz is a one in a million horse and I'm very lucky to have owned him."

Afterwards, Rosemary hosted several parties to say thank you to all her supporters and well-wishers. "I was on cloud 9 after it all finished. I'm calming down a bit now - I think I'm on about cloud 4" she laughs. The plan next season is to compete Opposition Buzz at Badminton and Burghley, although, Rosemary believes it's important to consider the bigger

picture and her aim is never to compete him too much. Meanwhile, 'Dodie' is taking a well-earned rest at Nicola's yard. "I dare not bring him home anymore. The last time he came back he galloped round his field when he wanted to be brought in and I feared for his legs!"