



At Home with Bill Levett

Bill Levett was born in Kyolge, a country town in the Northern Rivers region of northern NSW, and left Australia for England in 1994 to pursue his lifetime ambition to succeed in his chosen career – eventing. After sixteen years of hard work, with the usual ups and downs that eventing provides it finally looked as if Bill would get the change to represent his country and become part of the Australian team at the World Equestrian Games. After finishing 7th this year at Badminton on Hippolyte (and 28th on Political Trump) all Bill had to do was prove their fitness at Barbury Castle one day event to be in with a good chance of making the team. It all seemed do-able, but sadly it was not to be. Despite enjoying good runs on both horses at Barbury a couple of days later they were both sore. Hippolyte had damaged a tendon, putting him out for the rest of this year and possibly the next while Political Trump sustained a minor injury which should see him come back into work early next year. It was a devastating blow for Bill and his wife Jenny as well as the rest of the Levett team who really thought ‘this year was going to be Bill’s year’.

But with around 20 horses in work there is little time at the Levetts home, Little Charingworth Stud, situated on the outskirts of the quaint market town of Chipping Campden, to feel sorry for yourself. Bill and his team have picked themselves up and continue to look to the future. The Eventer caught up with Bill at his Gloucestershire home.

Photos: Fiona Scott-Maxwell

My Chances

Both horses pulled up from Badminton really well and looked and felt so well going into Barbury. I was really pleased with how they went and to have that chance of making it onto a team taken away from you is just the worst thing. I have been in this game long enough to know that is the way it goes with horses but it’s so frustrating. I just don’t seem to have any luck when it comes to teams. My first ‘potential’ team horse threw a splint just before WEG at the Hague in 1994, then I was first reserve for Jerez WEG in 2002. I got a call from the Australian management telling me to get myself ready to come because one of the team horses was not quite right and then they rang me the day before I was to go and said ‘no don’t worry the suspect horse is ok’. I had a good horse, Time Will Tell, going well in the run up to the Athens Olympics but about six months out it all went wrong. But what can you do? I manage my horses the best way I can. I probably run them less than a lot of riders and at Barbury I didn’t run them flat out because there wasn’t the need to and I think that is what gets you when there is no real justification for it.

Having said all that you have to look at the whole thing philosophically, I have a nice place to live, a wonderful wife and two healthy kids (Joshua and Ursula – five year old twins) and that is probably what stops the whole situation from ‘getting to me’.

I come home and have to deal with the kids and all the usual family things – you just have to get on with it. But the let downs are undoubtedly the hardest things in this sport.

I have been over here long enough to consider myself very experienced now. I rode well at Badminton - it wasn't a fluke. Before I went to Badminton I knew I could get a good result and hold my own in the company and I knew before I started cross country that if I could go inside the time I would be in the lead. It was Hippolyte's first 4* and he got a little tired, so I backed off him for about 30 seconds and got home with about 10 time penalties but we all felt that the run at that level taught him a lot and we're looking forward to the rest of the year. Hippolyte is a French thoroughbred out of a mare that went around Badminton and he is a great jumper, very quick and athletic and just snaps up at each fence.

I am lucky to have some great horses in my yard at the moment. One Too Many is very smart and just gone Advanced. He is as a good horse on the flat and jumping that I have ever had. He came 2nd in the 2* in a field of 100 at Barbury the other day. Quite often we end up having to sell any horses that we own and One Too Many was one of those but luckily his new owners have asked me to keep riding him which is a real bonus.

The Yard

We have around 22 horses in the yard at the moment and about 5 or 6 students. We run a system where students come to work, learn and compete. They have a horse on loan from us and we pay for that horses up keep, shoes, vets bills and so on. The students just have to register themselves and pay for their entries and we all go off to the events together. It allows those students who maybe couldn't afford to compete if they had to pay for everything to be able to compete every other weekend if they want to. I teach the students once a week in a group jumping lesson and also a flat work lesson and generally they stay for a year with us and then move on.

It's a system which works well but nothing is perfect. If the money side of it didn't come into it we would have four top grooms and run 15 horses or so but the income is not there for those sort of wages. Costs are going up all the time and it doesn't get easier to balance everything up.

I don't do a lot of teaching. I do a few clinics and teach some clients who come here but you can't do everything and producing horses and competing is really my thing. We are lucky to have good owners and we are constantly working on developing contacts, which might lead you to a new owner - it is a very competitive market. Australian riders are not the 'novelty' they used to be and in some ways are not at a disadvantage over here when some 'potential' owners may get looked down on for not supporting English riders. I wouldn't encourage anyone from Australia to come over here because it is a lot tougher to get off the ground now than it used to be. A foreign rider has no 'credit' with anyone over here and it is tough to carve out a spot. The other down side is that there is no (Australian) support crew in the way that there was in Australia, apart from at the big events. I mean if we want to ring up and ask Pottsy (Australian team vet in UK) something that is fine, but it is hard for all the Australian riders over here to get together for any type of squad schools. We all seem to be so busy, but when we do all get together it's great. We are mates and we stick together.

Bill with Hippolyte and One Too Many NJ





Family life

Life is always hectic and constant and as a family we find it hard to take time off for holidays. My wife Jenny, who I met at an event ball 12 years ago, works very hard in London three days a week as a Strategy Consultant and sometimes her work takes her off to America. As well as that she does all the organising side of things here; the paper work, staff things, accounts, the list seems endless - she is

At this stage Paul (Tapner's) chance of getting on the Australian team is looking good and certainly no one over here begrudges him his spot. He is a real worker and a nice guy and I wish him lots of luck in the run up to WEG. Inonothing (Paul's horse) is really tough and he runs it competitively most of the time. It seems to be the type that what ever you chuck at it, it stays sound.

So what happens now?

Once Hippolyte is over the worst of his injury he will come into work and I'll concentrate on his flat work and get his dressage up to speed with Bettina Hoy, who helps me and then start him back with some events when he is ready. I'll probably aim Political Trump at Badminton 2011 and that might give me the chance of having a couple of horses being ready for London 2012 and I hope that One Too Many will have done a couple of CCI3* by that time as well. I also have some owners making noises of buying me some more horses ... so we'll just have to see what happens on that front. I still love producing eventers and I love going cross country so I guess I'll keep doing what I'm doing.

an amazing organiser. Jenny grew up not far from where we are now and it's such a lovely place to live and perfect for eventing because most of our events are only a couple of hours away. Jenny rides as a hobby and the children both ride and do Pony Club. We just gave away our 39 year old pony to some friends of ours so he can teach a 7th family of children how to ride and so we now have Slipper and Basil, a sprightly 29 years young!

I think we will stay here until the children finish school. Jenny enjoys England but I think once the kids finish school she would be happy to split our time between Australia and here. Certainly at this stage it wouldn't be practical to think of going back to Australia to event. Jenny and I have our careers over here and although it has been

difficult to be away from my family as we are all pretty close I think I'll be staying here until I get horses out of my system ... which might take another 10 or 12 years!

Did you know?

As a young man Bill Levett originally went to work for Neale Lavis as a racehorse strapper but ended up spending the first six months working as a cattle drover.

As none of Neale's children were interested in competing Neale focused his eventing attentions on Bill, lending him his saddle, his shirts, boots, trailer - everything, as well as training him.

Neale also gave Bill the horse that he eventually went to England with, Mirabooka NJ (the NJ at the end of all Bill and Jenny's own horses' names is in recognition of Neale and everything he did for Bill - NJ being Neales nick name).