

For left Joe Meyer and Southern Star en route to a 20th placing at Burghley earlier this year. Bill Levett and his top horse In The Black by the Mitsubishi Pick-up on their way to a 15th place at Badminton last year.



Australian rider Bill Levett followed his dream later than most and came to the UK in 1994 at the age of 31. He now has a string of 13 horses to ride from his base in Chipping Camden, and he recently got engaged to Jenny Cripps, who works in the City

MY MOTHER was an infant teacher and my father a headmaster with a passion for horses, so that must be where my interest came from. I enjoyed an idyllic childhood with my four sisters in New South Wales, spending much of my time riding.

It was watching the three-day event at the LA Olympics on TV, though, that prompted me to become an event rider, although it would take me many years to achieve my goal.

After school I was a jackeroo for several years, working with cattle and breaking horses. I then went to work on a stud farm where Neale Lavis, a 1960 Olympic gold medallist, became my mentor. Later I moved to Sydney and set up my own horse-breaking business, which financed my eventing.

I was 24 when I began competing, but I enjoyed a fair amount of success in the early years, being placed in all but one of my first four lower level three-day events. As a result, I won the Australian version of the Range Rover Scholarship and came to England during 1988 to train at Gatcombe.

After a year I went home, ran my business for another five years, then sold everything and returned to Britain in 1994.

I was on the longlist for The Hague with Mirrabooka NJ, who had won the two-star at Pukehoe, but sadly we didn't get selected. Instead we went to Burghley and finished 17th. Afterwards he strained a tendon and needed two years off. I was aiming him for Badminton when he broke his shoulder at Longleat and was put down.

Losing my best horse meant that it has taken me longer to get going in the UK than I expected. You forget how much you leave behind. In the early days I had no infrastructure or support, but in the seven years I've been here I've been lucky enough to gain a wonderful band of owners without whom

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I wouldn't be doing what I do today, I'm finally seeing light at the end of the tunnel and that is nice.

I've now also got a good team of horses which is headed by In The Black, with whom I was 15th at Badminton last year. I've also got Time Will Tell, who was 10th at Blenheim recently, and Norwegian Connection NJ, who won the one-star at Necarne, plus a host of others, some of whom I have brought over from New Zealand.

My aim now is to compete regularly at the top and one day, hopefully, get on an Australian team. I believe that if you are successful at that level, the selectors will be hard pressed to leave you out.

I have found it pretty easy to acclimatise myself to England — after all, we speak the same language and share a lot of cultural things.

I've also made some very good friends, including Helen and Brian Payne, whose yard I share and who have been very supportive.

One of my biggest drawbacks is that I started so late in life — I had my first dressage lesson at 24 — and I would like to be at the stage I've reached today at 25 rather than 38. However, as it is, I've had the experience of business life and I'm certainly not planning to let my age hold me back.

Student Neil Spratt, 23, has enjoyed a successful first year in the UK, which has included a win at Thirlestane. Neil, who comes from Auckland, rides horses for record producer Tracey Bennett and his model wife Jo in Gloucestershire

I WAS born in the UK to British parents, but grew up in Wellington. My father was a marine engineer, but my mother, who had trained as an instructor in England, set up a riding school in Wellington and so I spent my formative years surrounded by horses.

I began eventing in the Pony Club, finishing

second in the Junior Championships one year and then fourth in the seniors. Both my sisters rode, too, and my youngest, Samantha, is now a jockey.

I enjoyed a few successes in horse trials after the Pony Club. With Gentle George I won the two-star at Auckland and finished seventh in the three-star at Taupo, while at Pahinui last December I was 11th with Deveron, a horse I swapped with a girl who was finding him difficult.

After school I went to university to study politics and media studies. I am supposed to be completing my last year now, but this amazing opportunity to compete in England came up and it was just too good to miss.

It came about through word of mouth, with someone mentioning to me that there was an opportunity going at Ragsgate Park in Cirencester to ride for record producer Tracey Bennett and his model wife Jo. I sent them my CV, plus a video of me riding, and was offered a job on the spot. I came over to England in January, bringing Gentle George and Deveron with me.

I've been thoroughly spoiled since my arrival. The yard is beautiful and the Bennetts are the coolest, most helpful people.

Shortly after arriving I took on Cosmos, a former dressage horse whom Jo, who began riding just two years ago, had competed at novice level. He's by Primitive Rising and is good in all three phases, a fact he proved recently when winning the two-star CIC at Thirlestane.

I haven't had such good fortune with Gentle George, whom I bought as a just-broken three-year-old and produced myself, for we fell at Blenheim, my first UK three-star.

Deveron, meanwhile, was being aimed at Boekelo. He's hard work on the flat, but he's a machine across country and I'm keeping my fingers crossed for him.

The rest of my time is taken up riding a novice for Jo, as well as breaking and producing others.

Many people are calling this season a write-off due to FMD, but to me, coming from a place where eventing is done on such a small scale, I still find the number of events here mind-blowing. I love the fact that eventing is so busy here and I love the cross-country courses. I also like English pubs, but I hate the weather and I miss the way of life back home — life is more chilled out back there.

My goal has always been to make the Kiwi team and I've got my sights set on the next Olympics. I'm aiming to get to the top as quickly as possible and, without wanting to sound cocky, I think I will get there because it is what I've always wanted.

On top of the world — Neil Spratt, pictured at Windsor last month on Cosmos, has enjoyed a good first season in the UK.

