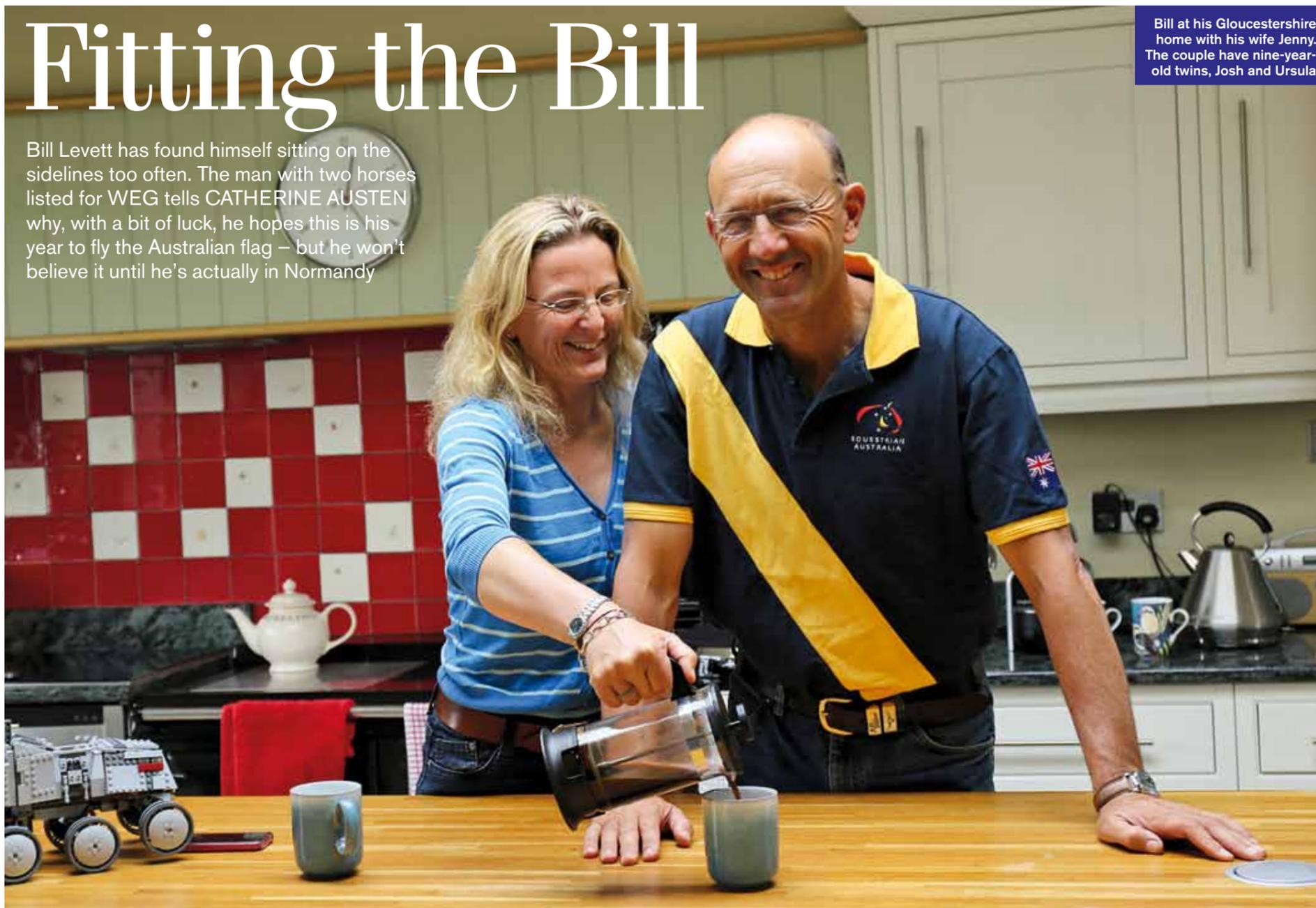


Fitting the Bill

Bill Levett has found himself sitting on the sidelines too often. The man with two horses listed for WEG tells CATHERINE AUSTEN why, with a bit of luck, he hopes this is his year to fly the Australian flag – but he won't believe it until he's actually in Normandy



Bill at his Gloucestershire home with his wife Jenny. The couple have nine-year-old twins, Josh and Ursula

If at first you don't succeed try, try again. So says Australian Bill Levett who, after 20 years of trying, is set to make his first championship appearance at the World Equestrian Games this month at the age of 51.

Bill is one of eventing's good guys. Hard working, professional and polite, this tall, tanned man with an intense blue gaze is both liked and respected within the sport. It comes as a mild shock that this will be the first time he has been capped for his country.

Bill has come within touching distance more than once.

He first came to Britain to prepare for the 1994 WEG at The Hague and won the final selection trial at Althorp.

"I thought 'this is it,'" he says with a wry smile. "But when they checked the horses over the following day mine had thrown a splint."

"I was first reserve for Jerez in 2002 and for one night only I thought I was going because Olivia Bunn's horse wasn't sound. But by the morning it had recovered."

Luck just hasn't been on Bill's side. There was further disappointment when Time Will Tell VI fractured a pastern at Lulworth while preparing for the Athens Olympics. Then, after One Two Many NJ was named as a reserve for the London games eight years later, the bay was injured at Barbury.

"I was seventh at Badminton in 2010 on Hippolyte and I thought I would go to the WEG in Kentucky for sure. But Hippolyte did a leg at Barbury. Sam Griffiths took my

reserve slot and ended up riding at Greenwich," adds Bill.

He has learned to deal with disappointment. He won't dare to believe that he is representing his country until he's in France and Shannondale Titan has passed the first trot-up.

"I've had two ambitions all along — to finish in the top three at a four-star and to represent Australia in a championship. It's a piece of the jigsaw that most riders want."

A female touch

We are sitting in the bright, pristine kitchen of the house that Bill and his wife Jenny have recently remodelled at Little Charingworth Stud, near Chipping Campden in north Gloucestershire.

Perhaps it is also Jenny's influence that makes it anything but a typical eventer's abode. There are no bridles flung over the back of sofa and only cushions line it, not terriers.

"Jenny is the driving force behind our business here. She's a natural businesswoman, which is a huge help because it's not my strength at all. I ride the horses and we both take responsibility for child care," says Bill.

Jenny, a strategy consultant who advises large companies at board level on how to grow and restructure their business, met Bill at an eventers' ball in 2001. They have nine-year-old twins, Josh and Ursula, who are members of the North Cotswold branch of the Pony Club.

"Having a family means rejigging your priorities; they are the most important things

to me," says Bill, who admits that he misses his family in northern New South Wales very much.

Bill grew up in a rural community. He was the youngest of five children and the only son of two teachers. Neither of his parents rode but Bill's father was "passionate" about horses.

"He followed racing closely and started breeding the odd foal. He instigated our interest in horses and got us all riding," says Bill who admits that following in his parents' career footsteps was never an option.

"I didn't apply myself at school, unlike my sisters, who were all very focused academically and went to university. My parents were very good about it and I was allowed to leave providing I found a job, which I did, as a jackaroo. Fortunately I ended up with a really top horseman, Theo Hill, who bred Australian stock horses. My role was to feed and muck out and I learnt how to handle foals — lots of basic horsemanship skills."

Bill's next stop was as a strapper for racehorses belonging to Neale Lavis, team gold and individual silver medallist at the 1960 Olympics.

"It just so happened that I went there when there was a drought and so I ended up droving cattle for the first four months, moving them around for grazing. Once the rains came, I spent the second half of the year working with the racehorses."

Twelve months later Bill wound up in Victoria to embark on a two-year stud management course before taking jobs pre-training cutting horses and managing a small Thoroughbred stud.

"That's when I saw Andrew Hoy on television competing at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. I was already thinking that I really wanted to do some competitive riding and when I saw that I said 'that would suit me'."

A new start

He wasn't able to do anything about it immediately, but before long Bill returned to his family home in New South Wales and Neale Lavis offered him another job.

"That was my opportunity to start riding. None of Neale's children competed and so he was pleased to get me going and share all this knowledge he had. He and his wife, Thelma, were hugely generous. They helped me find a horse, lent me a saddle and a trailer and gave me stock shirts that hadn't been used since the Rome Olympics in 1960."

Over six years there Bill worked his way up to advanced level. A turning point came in 1988 when he won a Range Rover scholarship to train with Mark Phillips at Gatcombe.

"It made me feel that if I wanted to do this there was more opportunity to be

BILL ON... His hopes for WEG

BILL is upbeat about Australia's chances of a medal.

"I hope the cross-country is really strong. Then if the Germans win they deserve to because everyone is going to struggle to stay in touch with them after the dressage," he says. "But we fancy our chances of a team medal. Anything else is a bonus — we want to put our qualification for the Rio Olympics to bed and put up solid performances in all three phases. A lot of it will come down to how influential the cross-country is, though."

A tough track will suit the 17.2hh Shannondale Titan. "He's long-striding with bags of scope and he's not difficult in the mouth so turning into a fence isn't a problem," adds Bill.



professional in Britain than in Australia, where you needed a job to finance it."

While Bill was at the Lavis's, Neale told him about a failed racehorse.

"He said 'you should take this horse. He's nice and I'll give him to you' but I said that I couldn't ride anything that ugly," laughs Bill as he recalls a skinny three-year-old with a big head.

But Neale persisted.

"A big dealer from Sydney was due to come and look at some of the ex-racehorses. Neale said 'if you don't have him today, he's gone'."

Bill said yes and that horse, Mirabooka NJ, took him to the UK in a bid for selection for The Hague in 1994 and, when that didn't work, into 15th place at

Burghley that year.

"All the young horses that Jenny and I buy and produce are given the suffix 'NJ' as a tribute to Neale Lavis — it's his nickname."

Producing results

There have been plenty of good horses since then. Bill steered into The Black into 15th place at their first Badminton in 2000; Time Will Tell VI was 10th at Blenheim and Burghley; Minuto finished fifth at Boekelo and 10th at Burghley. Sea Oro won Chatsworth in 2006; Hippolyte was third at Kreuth and Saumur before finishing seventh at Badminton 2010.

"JENNY IS A NATURAL BUSINESSWOMAN. IT'S NOT MY STRENGTH AT ALL"

Pictures by Fiona Scott-Maaswell & Peter Nixon



Bill Levett in action with his WEG mount Shannondale Titan — 'We fancy our chances of a team medal. Anything else is a bonus'

BILL'S TOP FOUR HORSES



SHANNONDALE TITAN

An 11-year-old gelding by Limmerick
Owned by: Anne, Mike and Clare Prentice and Bill Levett
Best result: winning the CCI*** at Saumur in 2013



IMPROVISE

A 10-year-old gelding by Master Imp
Owned by: Ali Butler, Elisabeth Murdoch and Jenny Levett
Best result: ninth place at the Luhmühlen CCI**** this year



SILK STONE

A 12-year-old gelding by Coevers Diamond Boy
Owned by: Francis Birks
Best result: heading the 2013 Tattersalls CIC***



ALEXANDER NJ

A nine-year-old gelding by Furore
Owned by: Merle Barrington, Andrew Knight, Catherine Witt and Veronica Wootton
Best result: 10th at this year's Tattersalls CCI***

But, with the aid of dressage help from Gareth Hughes, Bill really nailed 2013. He won Saumur on Shannondale Titan (*see box, above right*), and then took the CIC*** and second place in the CCI*** at Tattersalls on Silk Stone and Improve, all within a month.



At the start of this season hopes were high for WEG selection but Badminton didn't go to plan when Shannondale Titan picked up 21 penalties for breaking a frangible pin at fence 7, the Team GBR Silver Birch.

"I made a mistake and got there on a half-stride and 'Alfie' left his legs on the back rail," explains Bill whose mount, like many others, then got stuck in the mud on the final day and had four fences down.

"I thought I'd blown it," he admits. "But around all those difficult lines on the cross-country Alfie kept growing in confidence and showed how genuine

he is. The selectors also took his good record before that into consideration."

Bill went on to pilot Improve into ninth place on his four-star debut at Luhmühlen a month later with an impressive clear inside the time across country. The 10-year-old has been listed as a reserve for WEG, which means Bill has a second chance should anything happen to Shannondale Titan.

But, with a bit of luck, Improve will stay at home — his chance might come in Rio — and Bill and Alfie will show the world what they can do in France. A medal would be just deserts for this likeable, measured man. E



Bill and Jenny hand-graze Improve and Shannondale Titan outside the Gloucestershire home that they recently revamped ABOVE The couple met at an eventers' ball in 2001