



Worlds apart

There is an abundance of Australian and New Zealand event riders in the UK. Gemma Redrup finds out how they make the move to the northern hemisphere work

THERE has been an omnipresence of Antipodean event riders in Britain seemingly since the dawn of time. With a total of eight riders inside the top 20 British Eventing rider rankings last year, they have always been a dominant force. But uprooting and hauling everything to the UK from the other side of the world shouldn't be underestimated. Australian rider Bill Levett 'sold everything up'. "I had a horse breaking business that I had to wave goodbye to," he explains. Fellow Aussie Paul Tapner faced a similar situation when he moved. "I had a successful equestrian centre, fencing business and a temporary stable building company, too," says Paul. "It wasn't an easy decision to leave it all behind."

In fact, all riders who make the mammoth trip to the northern hemisphere have left something behind, no matter how big or small, in an attempt to carve a financially viable and highly successful career from eventing. Obviously family falls into this bracket, too. Young New Zealander Jesse Campbell is quick to explain how suddenly finding yourself thousands of miles away from your family can be a very bitter pill to swallow. "If things aren't going well and your entire family support network are on the other side of the world, the feelings you encounter are more acute — that's when being here in the UK gets really tough," he says. Multi-gold medalist and fellow Kiwi Blyth Tait misses the 'perfect climate' and Australian Chris Burton feels the same about no longer "riding first thing in the morning before escaping inside to avoid the heat and watching tennis all day". Sounds idyllic. So why go through the upheaval to live several time zones away from everything you know and love? Apparently it's simple. "The quality, frequency and level of competition in the UK is second to none," explains Jesse. Blyth agrees: "Here you're able to compete against some of the world's best riders every week, which means the rate of improvement in the horses and your own riding is vastly increased."

Paul says that he gets 'annoyed' if he has to travel any longer than two hours to an event in England. "But in Australia we could travel up to two days

Bill Levett is now settled in the UK with his wife Jenny and children Joshua and Ursula: 'I moved thinking this was it for at least the next 10 years and I had to make it work'

Pictures by Peter Nixon, Fiona Scott-Maxwell and Lucy Grinton



to get to competitions like Adelaide," he laughs.

But before these riders have even arrived on British soil, there is the rather large matter of getting everything, including their horses, from one side of the world to the other.

"It's a lot easier to do now than when I first moved over here in 1989," says Blyth. "There are a lot more flights available to move back and forth — I guess the world has shrunk in a way."

His 1996 Olympic gold medalist and double 1998 world gold medalist Ready Teddy sailed from New Zealand to the UK in 1994 by boat.

"The trip took about a month," says Blyth. "The cost of bringing horses by boat was about one-third of the cost of a flight back then so it made sense."

Paul did things slightly differently, moving backwards and forwards between Australia and the UK from 1999 to 2003.

"I timed it so that I ended up with three years of perpetual summer," he says.

He brought a few horses over with him at a time. "You can fit three horses into one air crate, which made things more economically viable," he says. "So I flew three over in 1999, six in 2001 and three in 2002."

Fellow Australian Chris Burton was also lucky enough to be helped by some supportive owners, which meant he could fly his six advanced horses to the UK upon his decision to move in 2011.

Getting started

BUT once here, how did these Antipodeans go about finding somewhere to base themselves? Many did work placements with well-established riders before settling into their own yards.

"I did work experience at Mark Todd's in 2009. I then went back to New Zealand, but while I was in the middle of my second year at university, Andrew Nicholson offered me a job and I couldn't say no," says Jesse, who has since set up his own yard in Marlborough, Wilts, where many of his fellow countrymen are based.

In 1988 Bill Levett won a Range Rover scholarship to move to Gatcombe Park to be based with Mark Phillips for a year.

"After that I didn't return to England until 1994, when I was selected to ride Mirabooka NJ for Australia at The Hague World Championships in the Netherlands," says Bill.

"At first being in the UK was very difficult, but I managed to make some friends who let me stay with them and took me around to various events. I never moved here thinking, 'I'll see how it goes and if it doesn't work out I'll move back to Australia.' I've 10 years moved thinking, 'This is it for at least the next 10 years' and I had to make it work."

Conversely, Mark Todd never planned to stay in the

Chris Burton considered the US or Britain as his base: 'But in the end Britain won me over — it has everything I need on my doorstep'

SAM GRIFFITHS SAYS:



"I've been in Britain about 20 years — I started off as a working pupil for Blyth Tait, then I worked for Matt Ryan. There are a lot of Australian and New Zealand riders who do the same. There are so many opportunities on offer here in Britain and sometimes we forget how lucky we are. People want to be the best and if you want to be the best you need to compete on the best circuit in the world."

"Riders often give up a lot at home when they come here. My parents had a property which would have made a great eventing base, but I knew I had to come to Britain and start again from literally nothing. The riders who come over are disproportionately successful and that is partly why — they have often given up amazing places and strong businesses back home, so they have a real drive to make it work in this country."

"Once they arrive, riders often start off by basing themselves with another Antipodean rider, who can give them advice on events and horse management. The way we keep horses here is very different and ones which are flown up from the southern hemisphere often take a year or 18 months to adjust. They arrive and you breathe a sigh of relief that they've made it, and they often look great — particularly if they arrive in Britain's winter in their summer coats. Then a month later they really lose condition and start growing a winter coat, just as they really are coming into their summer coats."

"I think it'd be interesting to look into that migration of riders to Britain, how they make it work, what challenges they have to overcome and what they sacrifice, as well as how the horses adjust."



New Zealand's Lizzie Brown on Henton Attorney General: 'It takes a year for a horse to adjust fully to moving hemispheres'

UK for good when he first visited.

"I came over in 1979 as a 23-year-old," he says. "I didn't think my visit would be permanent — I thought I'd be here for a couple of years and then return to New Zealand, but opportunities to ride more horses arose and so I stayed."

Chris took a slightly different approach when deciding where to base himself. "I bought a round the world air ticket to work out where I wanted to be," he says.

Chris' first port of call was the United States, where he caught up with fellow Australian Boyd Martin, who is now based in South Carolina for the winter and Pennsylvania for the rest of the year.



Mark Todd first came to the UK aged 23. He is now based in Britain again, having made a comeback after retiring to live in New Zealand

"Moving to the US was my other option," Chris explains. "But in the end Britain won me over — it has everything I need on my doorstep."

How do horses cope?

TRAVELLING between 9,000 and 12,000 miles often sets the human body out of kilter, especially when it involves dealing with the transition from one climate to another. Jetlag is a real pain, but something we are often able to shake off after a few days. But how do horses cope with the change in hemisphere and style of eventing competition?

Mark Todd, who has brought over between 15 and 20 horses from New Zealand over the years, says: "I've found that they have all needed a break at some point within the first year they arrive."

"Some horses cope better than others — my 1980 Badminton winner, Southern Comfort III, arrived in England just eight weeks before he won the event."

Bill agrees with Mark that it usually takes a horse a year to adjust fully to the British seasons.

"It's a big ask to rush a horse once they arrive," he explains. "The rate at which they get used to life here isn't really dependent on type — it takes time for them to find their rhythm with regards to feeding, the weather, vets and farriers."

Blyth also shares this philosophy, saying: "I learnt from experience and I now wouldn't bring anything to the UK between September and February as the dramatic change in climate, going from the warmth of the summer in the southern hemisphere to the winter in the northern hemisphere is too much to ask. Horses end up with horrible coats as their bodies can't work out what is going on."

Kiwi rider Lizzie Brown arrived in the UK in 2011 with one novice horse.

"It was a bit of a disaster because I was under pressure to get out competing — you can't really arrive and then wait a year to go to a show when you've moved over here to event," she says. "But I've since found with more experience that it takes a year for a horse to adjust fully."

Mark adds that new arrivals also take time to adapt to the different water and nutrients they find in Britain.

"Upon the arrival of any horse from New Zealand,

THE VET'S VIEW

EQUINE Australia's head team vet Graham Potts says that there is rarely a serious issue with horses arriving from the southern hemisphere to event in the UK.

"Modern systems mean that a horse tends to cope just as well as humans do and their health isn't compromised," he explains. "Respiratory problems can occur due to horses standing on the plane for so long. Diet management is also paramount once they arrive to avoid tying up due to a drastic change in the type and quality of forage."

"Once horses arrive some can go off the boil. If a rider brings a horse over for a one-off, high-level competition, more pressure is often placed on the horse to perform on a day-to-day basis over a four- to six-week period."

He states that this is probably more down to the psychology of the rider as they feel more pressure to make the event a success rather than a horse's health issue.

"Equally, if a rider brings a horse over too far in advance, the horse can often start to struggle with acclimatising to climate and diet, just as a human athlete would if they went to train in a different country for an extended period of time. This is often when you find horses need a proper break to adjust," he continues.



Jesse Campbell started out in the UK with work experience at Mark Todd's, but it was a job offer from Andrew Nicholson that persuaded him to leave university in New Zealand. He now has his own yard in Wiltshire

I would issue it with an immuno boost supplement, a double strength wormer due to the length of the journey, and a flu vaccination," he says.

Chris points out: "Some don't eat up as well and can suffer with gastric ulcers, and these problems tend to show up after a couple of months — it's a tough change for them."

Paul interestingly points out that he learnt to bring over quiet horses from Australia due to the change in format and layout of events in Britain.

"In Australia each phase was situated a long distance apart from the other, or even held on a different day. So when the horses came over to the UK some struggled to cope with the fact that each phase could be situated next to another one and that there was much more going on," he explains.

In it for the long haul

DESPITE the preferable weather Down Under and the stunning New Zealand landscape, all of these riders are in the UK to stay for at least the duration of their eventing careers.

Thanks to their moves, many Antipodean riders have also met their future wives, such as Paul and Bill. Many now have children here too, so their world trip to chase their eventing dreams has shaped their whole life. H&H