



# Riding

## on the other side of the world



by Harriet Leahy

**In the FEI World eventing athlete rankings, of the five Aussies in the top 30, three of them live and operate their business in the UK. We asked eventers Bill Levett, Matt Ryan and Stephen Way why they felt the need to move to - quite literally - the other side of the world, in order to fulfil their eventing ambitions?**

A bronze medal behind France and Germany in the Rio Olympics really says it all: the Australian Eventing team is still very much on top of its game and a force to be reckoned with. For a few heart-stopping moments there was even a considerable chance of a silver, maybe a gold, medal!

Interestingly however, 50% of the Australian Olympic eventing team (Chris Burton and Sam Griffiths, the highest placed of the team in individual 4th) reside permanently in the United Kingdom.

In fact, in the FEI World eventing athlete rankings, of the five Aussies in the top 30, three of them live and operate their business in the UK. Chris Burton - ranked 3rd in the world, operates from his yard in Surrey in the South East of the country; Andrew Hoy, ranked 12th, is based in Leicestershire; and Sam Griffiths, ranked 26th, is a great friend, former stablemate and fellow Olympic teammate of Chris Burton, and lives in Dorset. So why do these riders feel the need to move to - quite literally - the other side of the world, in order to fulfil their eventing ambitions?

Australia has enjoyed a long and fulfilling partnership with British eventing. In 1955 (prior to the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, where the equestrian events were held in Stockholm due to Australian quarantine laws) the first Australian eventing hoofbeats February/March 2017 - Page 4

team were sent to England to 'learn' eventing. Indeed, the United Kingdom is widely lauded as the eventing capital of the world - not least because of its proximity to Europe and therefore access to a whole host of important events. With at least one event every weekend (and often more during the week) during the British eventing season - from March to October - and the accessibility that the size of the country enables (much easier to drive across England than across South Australia, for example), the opportunities to compete are endless.

The official body, British Eventing, regulates and schedules over 180 events throughout Britain that cater for nearly 94,000 entries per season. British Eventing has more than 15,000 members. By comparison, Equestrian Australia has nearly 20,000 members - but they cover every discipline (showing, endurance, dressage, driving, vaulting, showjumping, reining, para equestrian and eventing) and represent all six states.

In terms of numbers, the eventing population of Australia could not hope to compete with the UK, so the fact that we are frequently trumping them on the international stage speaks volumes for the sheer ability and talent of our horsemen and women.

We chatted to three of these eventers who have made a name - and a life - for themselves on the British Eventing scenes.



### BILL LEVETT

Bill's equine career started as a Jackaroo in NSW, from where he landed a job with former professional eventer and gold medal winning Olympian Neale Lavis. After a 2 year stint in Victoria to gain his stud management degree, Bill returned to Neale's yard with the purpose of becoming a professional event rider. Encouraged and mentored by Neale, Bill's tenacity paid off and he won a scholarship to train with the eminent Captain Mark Phillips at Gatcombe Estate in England. Here Bill got a real taste of what life was like on the other side of the water - and although the time wasn't quite right, he knew that he wanted to return to England one day to pursue eventing as a career.

It was in fact Neale who provided the horse - Mirabooka NJ - that gave Bill the opportunity to come back to England in 1994 when selected for The Hague WEG squad. With this 4\* horse providing the break that Bill needed, he made the move.

"I came to the UK to pursue my lifetime ambition to succeed in my chosen career." An interesting statement, as it seems as though in order to be 'successful', Bill needed to be in England?

*"I like producing young horses, and the sheer variety and amount of events available here mean that you can be out every week, which is of utmost importance when you are trying to run and compete a team of horses. And obviously the proximity to Europe broadens the pool immensely."*

*"I do enjoy the lifestyle in England, and have found it a very easy place to live."*

*Although I love the Australian lifestyle (warm weather, the outdoorsy lifestyle), I also enjoy the seasons in England, and the people have always been lovely and very welcoming."*

Left: Bill Levett at Chatsworth 2016 riding Alexander NJ  
Below: Bill with Shannondale Titan and Jenny holding Improvise.  
Photos by Fiona Scott-Maxwell



During the foot and mouth outbreak in 2001, when quarantine restrictions put a halt on all things equestrian, Bill met his now-wife Jenny. A keen and successful rider herself, together they set up home and business in Gloucestershire in the South of England. Bill admits Jenny is the driving force behind the partnership!

"I do a fair few clinics - I did a couple in the US in the previous two years, and have been involved with coaching the South African coaches. Teaching is difficult here as during the season I am so busy, and that tends to be when everyone wants lessons. And in the winter it just gets dark too early, and is a case of getting on with doing your own horses.

"But I do realise now the sacrifices that I have made by coming here, with regards to my family (I have four sisters, all very close in age, so we grew up together). I didn't realise how much I would miss - the involvement in the kids' lives, weddings etc.... The first 10 years were fine as we were so busy competing and producing horses but now..... it's not like France or something, you can't just 'pop back' to Australia.

"Jenny and I are a great team though. As with all things equestrian it's been a rocky road with many ups and downs - however I'm still going strong and love what I do."

Bill is still competing successfully at four-star level, notching top ten places at Badminton, Burghley, Luhmühlen and Kentucky onto his belt. He remains positive that he can attribute much of his success (despite being a world class rider) to his move to the United Kingdom.

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