

If at first you

GILLIAN NEWSUM REVEALS THAT NOT ALL OF BRITAIN'S 2012 OLYMPIC STORIES WERE HAPPY ONES. ALONG THE ROAD TO OUR RECORD MEDAL TALLY IN LONDON SOME PEOPLE WERE LEFT BY THE WAYSIDE TO PICK UP THE PIECES OF SHATTERED DREAMS, TO TRY TO REKINDLE THEIR COMPETITIVE SPIRIT AND TO START THE SLOW FIGHT BACK TO THE TOP OF THEIR SPORT; EVENT RIDER PIGGY FRENCH WAS ONE OF THEM



don't succeed...

LAST JUNE SHE was a dead cert for the team with two outstanding horses to choose from, but by the end of that month both horses had been withdrawn because of injuries. "I know people have pointed the finger and asked: why did two horses go wrong within a month of the Olympics? But the horses had completely different and unpredictable injuries. Even so, I've had doubts about myself, wondering whether there was anything I did wrong or could have done differently. It has made me very negative."

Jakata, the horse Piggy rode to second place at Badminton in 2011 – the last time the Event was run – suffered a small tear in his pastern after an easy win in the three star at Houghton in May last year, but the injury was only picked up later when he had an MRI scan. This was a blow but not a disaster because Piggy still had the talented 12-year-old DHI Topper W, her partner when winning the test event at Greenwich in 2011. At the end of June Piggy gave him a gentle run in the two star at Barbury as a 'sweetener' for the Olympics, only to find that he came away from the Event with a tendon injury. "The ground had been perfect, so there was no reason for it. On the law of averages you don't expect two horses to go wrong at the same time. Both of them had been problem free for the last three years, and both had been on the form of their lives. It was obviously just not meant to be."

That metaphorical shrug of the shoulders disguises the enormous depth of her disappointment, a disappointment that was still with her when I spoke to her at the end of last year. "Four months later and I still feel empty inside," she said. "Words like 'disappointed' and 'gutted' don't come close to describing how I felt, and still feel. This was not a normal Olympic Games; it really was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to do your very best in a sport that you love on home ground; it was a piece of history."

"London 2012 had been my aim for the last four years and I couldn't really see past it. It had been such a massive

thing for me for such a long time, and to get so close to it and then for it not to happen was heartbreaking. I had been mentally preparing myself for it, dealing with the extra pressures on me from the media, from trainers and supporters, but most of all from the pressure I was putting on myself to be as good as I possibly could so that we could get the Gold on home ground.

"I know it's only a sport, but it's difficult to get the fire back inside of you and to get back out there and feel competitive again. It has been a very difficult time for me. I'm not normally one to dwell on things, but this has knocked a lot more out of me than I thought it would. It has left a big scar."

The personal disappointment also comes with a sense of guilt for having let down all the people who supported her in her quest – her father, Wally, who owns a half share in both of her top horses, her mother, Kate, who Evented at Advanced level and who is always on hand 'as back up', her

sister Nini who put her own Event career on hold to be Piggy's head groom in the run-up to the Games. Apart from the family, there are the grooms (usually about seven) on her busy yard in Leicestershire, her business manager Sara Fowler, the owners, including Michael Underwood who co-owns Jakata and DHI Topper W, the trainers, the sponsors and her many supporters who have been behind her all the way. "I think the worst thing was watching everyone so close to you fall apart as well."

It was particularly galling that Piggy had been so successful in the test event at Greenwich the previous year on DHI Topper W, who had clearly relished the atmosphere of the stadium there and produced "the dressage test of his life," helping to propel the partnership to victory. "It would have been his track at Greenwich," says Piggy of the cross-country course for the Olympics. "He doesn't need a lot of setting up and he can be very quick. He's really a bit of a pony, and his showjumping is brilliant. I would not have worried if I had had to jump two rounds on him."

She did not go to Greenwich to watch the Games. "I couldn't. But I did watch on telly." Her only consolation

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was that Nicola Wilson, one her greatest friends, had replaced her on the team. "Nicola and I had started competing together and we had been desperate to get to London together. So it was horrible for her when I was selected and she wasn't, and then a whirlwind for her when I had to withdraw."

In the immediate aftermath of losing her place on the team, Piggy (a nickname that has stayed with her since she was a baby, while her given name, Georgina, is rarely used) went on holiday to Cape Verde, off the west coast of Africa, and did not want to come home again. "I could have done with staying there for three months."

“*It can only be a matter of time before the Piggy we know – competitive, determined, committed and focused – starts breathing fire again*”



BELOW
Piggy riding Jakata,
The Mitsubishi
Motors Badminton
Horse Trials, 2011

She admits to going 'on strike' for a while, but the realisation that she had a yard full of horses, bills to pay and owners to keep happy soon brought her back to reality. There can be up to 30 horses on her yard at one time, and Piggy normally rides between eight and 14 of them a day. She also teaches (something she is beginning to enjoy very much) and she runs her own business, in partnership with Kate Walls, bringing on young Event horses to sell. The company is called, appropriately, French Exchange.

In spite of the emptiness inside, Piggy still managed to return a couple of good results towards the end of last season, taking sixth place at the three star in Boekelo with West Side and a win in the two star at Osberton on Tinkas Time. She regards both horses as exciting prospects for the future.

As for the immediate future, her hopes of success at Badminton this year rest on Jakata, who came back into work last autumn. In four starts at this major Event, she has completed twice, coming 31st with Flintlock in 2003 at her first attempt and in 2011 finishing second on Jakata. Could she go one better this time?

It is clear that Piggy's enthusiasm for the sport was severely dented by the heartbreak of her thwarted Olympic ambitions, but a flame still flickers. It can only be a matter of time before the Piggy we know – competitive, determined, committed and focused – starts breathing fire again. 🐾