

'I have to keep going'



From missing the London Olympics when both her horses went wrong, to a disappointing withdrawal from the upcoming Europeans, it's been a tough 12 months for Piggy French. Catherine Austen finds out how she has coped and what her plans are for her new yard

"AFTER the Olympics, I didn't think that this would be my year," says Piggy French. "I thought that I'd be out [of the team] for two years and I'd accepted that. Then Tinkas Time suddenly came through.

"But he came out of Barbury [where he won a CIC3* section] just a little bit sore. I am probably the only person out of all the hundreds there that had an injury from Barbury, so it's just clearly not meant to be right now.

"It's not serious and there could have been a chance of getting him to the Europeans, but if something had gone wrong it might have done serious damage," continues the 32-year-old equestrian. "He's excited me so much. But it's a Europeans... Nothing could be worse than missing London."

She will, of course, live to fight another day. "I've never dreaded making phone calls so much — admitting to people that I wouldn't be going to another championship," she says, looking down at the table. "I dreaded ringing Mike [Underwood, who owns Tinkas Time] and Yogi [Breisner]. I have so much respect for them and I wanted to go and do this for them as much as anybody.

"But Laura Collett was in hospital fighting for her life [she suffered a rotational fall at Tweseldown on 8 July] and it does bring everything into perspective. They are horses; everyone has a *** time at some point and mine's clearly now. But no one's died."

A new start PROFESSIONAL that she is, Piggy is doing her best to remain positive. She is in the process of moving from Lubenham, Leics, to a brand new yard at Maidwell, just over the county boundary into Northamptonshire.

"I'm sad to leave — I've been here eight years and Maurice and Viv Thompson [who own her current yard] have been very good to me. But I think it's time for a change of office," she says.

"It will be nice to regroup and start again." David and Belinda Keir (Belinda part-owned Flying Machine, whom Piggy took to four-star level) has turned an old dairy farm into a super-smart set-up, with 24 stables in a barn, a 60x40m arena, gallops and a grass arena "which we will do spangly with banners and flagpoles", she says, the sparkle returning to her eyes.

"There's a cross-country training field with a water jump; I have a three-bedroom bungalow, and the staff house will be very smart."

She also has a posse of young horses, about whom she is very enthusiastic. The Friday of Burghley (6 September) will be busy — she's qualified three five-year-olds and two four-year-olds for the Durbury Burghley Young Event Horse Championships.

"I have some lovely young horses, which I've never really done before — I've usually had slightly older ones whom we've tried to turn around or change them to my way of thinking," she says.

One of the four-year-olds, a smart roan, is owned by comedian Jennifer Saunders, who met Piggy while she was making a television programme last year.

Piggy says: "She was really supportive and started to follow me [on Twitter], and sent me messages when she heard I wasn't going to London. During the Olympics she texted me asking if I was at Greenwich, I replied, 'No, drowning my sorrows'. The next day she sent me a big bottle of whisky!"

"Then she said she would quite like to own a horse. We went to Richard Sheane's in Ireland to have a look and chose Aubane Boy."

The move to the new base will, she hopes, reinvigorate the yard. She is keen to attract more good horses and more owners again. "I really cut back on numbers concentrating on London," she says.

The disappointment of London ALTHOUGH dawn is stealing over Piggy's horizon with this move, it has been a long, dark night.

"I was blinded by London," she says, her voice cracking. "I was desperate to get there to do the very best I could for my team, myself, my horses."

"I thought I had one of the best in the world in Topper [DHI Topper W], I believed he could have won an individual medal — and every day I was working towards that. To anyone involved in sport, London was everything."

"I know lots of people have missed Olympics and other big events, but there is something about London that no one can replace."

In the years building up to that sporting colossus, Piggy's form rose like a wave. That stunning senior squad debut in the European eventing championships at Fontainebleau in 2009 with an individual silver was followed by second and third at Bramham and a World Equestrian Games (WEG) slot the following year.

In 2011 she was second at Badminton, won Blenheim and was on Britain's bronze medal-winning team at the Europeans. And she remained a winner on the national circuit.

"The two years before London were massive — 2011 was amazing and it was easily done, too," she says. "The horses came to form and I didn't feel like I was doing anything differently or trying too hard — it was just happening."

"I went into 2012 excited, mostly because I had two excellent horses who were coming into

"[Jennifer Saunders] started to follow me [on Twitter]. Then she said she would quite like to own a horse. We chose Aubane Boy"

their prime and working towards the biggest event in our lifetime."

After winning the Olympic test event in 2011 on DHI Topper W, Piggy joked that she hoped she hadn't peaked too early. It turned out, cruelly, that she had. In the space of two weeks, first Jakata and then Topper hit the injured list.

She says: "The day we realised Topper was out, the Olympic torch came through our village. "You know that's how things go with horses, but you watch the most amazing thing happen in front of you that you are desperate to be doing — and your head is there."

"I've been empty since and I'm not that sort of person. I'd be quite laid-back and realistic — if things aren't meant to be, they aren't meant to be. But with that I found it really difficult to think, 'Oh well, there'll be a next time.' There won't — there'll never be another competition to work for quite like that one."

"And everyone around me fell apart — my team, my supporters — and I felt I had to keep going. So many people are on board with you, emotionally, and I found being such a

'MIKE'S HAD THE SAME KNOCKS AS ME'

MICHAEL UNDERWOOD owns Tinkas Time and shares Jakata and DHI Topper W with Piggy's father Wally. The first horse Piggy rode for him was Fendalce Victoria, whom she had for the final two seasons of the mare's career, culminating in third place at Bramham in 2005.

"He's good friends with Dad and they used to come to events together to watch Victoria," she says. "Dad hadn't really been involved in owning horses, but I suggested we got a horse together to produce and sell."

"The first one we had for six months and doubled its value, so we went in again. They got keen and we bought some more. Then London became the plan."

"Mike's been amazing with every horse. He has an attitude and mentality that is just a pleasure to ride for. He loves the job to be done properly. He wants his horses to look good, go well and no corners to be cut."

"He trusts my opinion when it comes to buying horses and trusts me with my riding of them, and that is what makes it such a good relationship — there's hopefully a lot of respect for one another," she muses.

"When the luck does turn, he deserves it — he's had the same knocks as me."



Piggy's Burghley Young Event horse finalists, from left to right: Courtney Druitt, Extreme, Darceel II, Duke of Love, Marswood and Aubane Boy

disappointment really tough." A retreat from the evening scene — and from endlessly kindly meant expressions of sympathy — would have been understandable. But, like the well-brought-up Norfolk girl she is, she painted on a smile and kept competing. "You put your face on and keep going," she says simply.

Giving up — or having proper time out — wasn't something she contemplated, however. "I have a big business and a lot of people rely on me," she says. "Tempting as it was, I couldn't say, 'Bye, I'm out of here for six months.'"

The television was permanently on during the Games. "I couldn't switch it off. The whole thing was amazing. I love being British, I love being on teams and was rooting for everyone — I was just gutted I wasn't there to help."

She admits that she found it difficult to get motivated again. Even winning Osberton CCI* on Tinkas Time didn't produce its usual thrill. "When they played the National Anthem, I felt numb," she says.

"I'm very self-motivated, but since London it would have been easy not to be. I don't want to sound like a brat and I don't want people feeling sorry for me, but you need the fire in your belly to be really good."

"Dreams keep you going. They get you out of bed in the morning and motivate you to do better, and when you've dreamed one thing for so long and it's just slipped from your hands..."

The rise of the ultimate competitor



"I love being British, I love being on teams and was rooting for everyone [at the Olympics], just gutted I wasn't there to help"

said if I found something I liked, I should let him know. He saw the video and we went ahead."

If there is any fairness in the world, Piggy has now paid her debts to whatever vengeful god she has offended and 2014 will be a clean sheet. Topper has been in work for a while and looks a million dollars, but Piggy is unwilling to risk him on hard ground while her luck is out.

Jakata should be back, as will Tinkas. And the cement is beginning to set on her partnership with new ride, Westwood Mariner.

She has also developed another string to her bow, as all event riders must to survive in an extraordinarily badly compensated sport. Tom How, 24, has based himself and six horses with her this season and she has enjoyed helping him.

"Tommy is a fantastic lad with a lot of potential and nice horses, and I want [success] for him probably as much as he wants it himself," she says. "It's been rewarding seeing him improve."

"I will probably remain doing that with the old rider. Competing is my career and my livelihood, but teaching is something I'm definitely getting more into."

It seems impossible that the luck will not turn for one of the best event riders Britain has produced. Her medal collection has only just started and the London scar is starting to heal.

She takes a big, bracing breath and says with determination: "I want to make my new yard one of the best and somewhere that great horses and results come out of."

"But maybe the selectors shouldn't select me again by name — just leave a blank space. And on the day of the trot-up I'll be like, 'I'm coming!'"

That's more like it. H&H



After his win at Barbury, Tinkas Time was found to be a little sore and withdrawn from the European squad