

This Sporting Life

In the Saddle

Norfolk's own Piggy French is an international event rider. Abigailtmarsh found out more about her hopes for success this summer



It has been a busy time for Georgina "Piggy" French – not only has she had the usual events to prepare for but there's also Britain's biggest sporting occasion to consider.

As the country has been gearing up for the Olympics, Piggy, 31, has been enjoying a series of successes at other events while also, along with other riders, contending with the appalling weather.

"Events up and down the country have been cancelled because of the rain and the waterlogged ground, which is unfortunate but there is little we can do about it," she says. "I should find out soon, however, whether I have been selected for the Olympic team, which is very exciting."

Piggy, who now lives in the Midlands, was brought up in the South Norfolk village of Shotesham, attending school at Saxlingham Nethergate and then Beeston Hall.

Her mother and two sisters were also equestrian enthusiasts and she cannot remember a time when she did not enjoy being in the saddle.

"I was probably riding before I could walk," she admits. "I have loved horses and ponies all my life and knew I wanted to be involved with them in one way or another but it was a long time before I thought I was good enough to make a career of it."

It was, in fact, when she was 15, that she had her first big win. This came in 1996, with her Junior horse Lloyds Gamble.

"I did my GCSEs and then started at sixth form college but I would come home every weekend to spend time with horses and soon realised that I didn't want to study, I wanted to ride.

"I was very fortunate that I could begin by taking local work, riding people's ponies for them and mucking out their stables. I was gaining experience by riding lots of different horses and before I knew it, I was competing more and more."

Her first real breakthrough came with Rebecca Finch's Flintlock II, who took Piggy to her first Badminton in 2003. He was also her team gold medal-winning horse at the Young Rider European Championships in 2001, where they finished fourth individually.



It was from there that Piggy's eventing career went from strength to strength, and today she is established as one of the country's leading riders and a member of the UK's World Class Squad.

Heading her impressive string of horses are Wally French and Michael Underwood's Jakata, who took her to the 2010 World Equestrian Games and the 2011 European Championships, and DHI Topper W on whom Piggy won the London 2012 Test Event in 2011.

So far this year, Piggy has been constantly on the go, travelling the length and breadth of the country to compete and try out new horses. It has been disappointing that events such as Badminton and Chatsworth have been washed out, but there is still the highlight of the sporting world to look forward to.

"I should find out soon if I have a place on the Olympic team – there will be five of us altogether, men and women," she says.

"If I am selected, it will be everything to me. The Olympics is what I have been working towards - and the fact it is going to be held here in Britain makes it even more special.

"This is never going to happen again in my lifetime."

Piggy, who moved from Norfolk to the Midlands, as it was easier to travel to events, believes she had a good start with her riding from her Shotesham base.

"My mother still lives in Norfolk, at North Elmham, so I return frequently. Norfolk is a beautiful place, a lovely part of the world. I have really enjoyed riding and spending holidays up on the coast there over the years.

"I also still enjoy competing at Great Witchingham International Horse Trials and at Burnham Market," she says.

And she adds: "Horses are my passion - and I do feel very lucky to be able to work with them as I do.

"There is nothing quite like the feeling you get when you succeed at a competition with a horse you have trained. You just feel so proud." ■

Portrait by Tony Meredith, other photography by Trevor Holt / www.kingfishermediaservices.com

For more information on Piggy French visit www.piggyfrench.co.uk