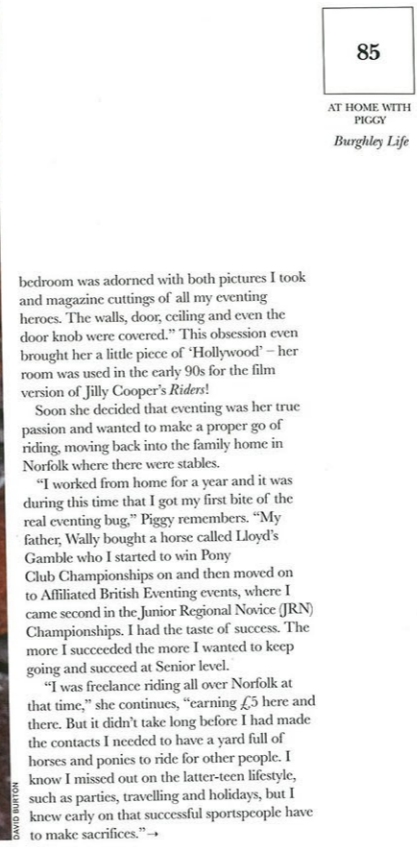


At home. with Piggy

» Nina Lloyd-Jones catches up with the talented Piggy French at her home in Leicestershire and discovers the stories behind her success in the eventing world



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bedroom was adorned with both pictures I took and magazine cuttings of all my eventing heroes. The walls, door, ceiling and even the door knob were covered." This obsession even brought her a little piece of 'Hollywood' – her room was used in the early 90s for the film version of Jilly Cooper's *Riders!*

Soon she decided that eventing was her true passion and wanted to make a proper go of riding, moving back into the family home in Norfolk where there were stables.

"I worked from home for a year and it was during this time that I got my first bite of the real eventing bug," Piggy remembers. "My father, Wally bought a horse called Lloyd's Gamble who I started to win Pony Club Championships on and then moved on to Affiliated British Eventing events, where I came second in the Junior Regional Novice (JRN) Championships. I had the taste of success. The more I succeeded the more I wanted to keep going and succeed at Senior level.

"I was freelance riding all over Norfolk at that time," she continues, "earning £5 here and there. But it didn't take long before I had made the contacts I needed to have a yard full of horses and ponies to ride for other people. I know I missed out on the latter-teen lifestyle, such as parties, travelling and holidays, but I knew early on that successful sportspeople have to make sacrifices." →

My bedroom was adorned with magazine cuttings of all my eventing heroes

Wymondham College. The transition from a small, close-knit school to such a large one was a shock to her young self and "school, on the whole, was a bad time for me; not in the sense that I was traumatised or bullied but I just knew I couldn't fulfil any of my lifetime ambitions by being there.

"I wasn't, and am still not, naturally academic," she continues. "I struggle to sit down and read books, although I have recently started to enjoy biographies written by other sportspeople to see what makes them tick!"

School aside, her childhood memories are of her and her sisters always outside, riding or doing some sort of sport.

After her GCSEs Piggy headed to Cambridge Arts and Science college to do a course in Photography and Art. "I was still a massive fan of eventing but wasn't competing competitively at that time, but was taking a lot of photos. I was mad keen on it, and have kept the scrap books with all the pictures I took back then. My

RIGHT: PIGGY WITH CHICAGO II, THE HORSE ON WHICH SHE WON THE SHROPSHIRE GRAND SLAM, OWNED BY SUE CRANE



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As a child, Piggy had it firmly drummed into her by her mother that everyone should make the best of what they had. "This was firmly stamped into my ethos when I set up my string at my parents", she notes. "I was very conscious of doing the best I could with a horse for any owner. I always felt honoured that they had put their trust in me and always worked to get each horse to the level I thought it could go to."

This dedication and humility has served Piggy well. Flintlock was one such horse that she has reaped the rewards of working hard to improve. Started off at Pony Club-level eventing, under Piggy's eye, he kept on improving and improving. "We ended up going to four-star level – including completing Burghley twice," she explains. "He wasn't your typical event horse but, with hard work, he did more than anyone could ever have imagined he was capable of."

Some Day Had been ridden by several people over the years. Within less than a year, Piggy and the horse had formed a strong partnership, which caught the 2009 British team selectors' eye. Their "wild card" selection proved successful – the pair brought home a Silver Individual medal from the 2009 Senior Europeans at Fontainebleau.

"To have been called up last minute to represent my country at the Europeans last year was a complete dream," Piggy smiles. "I still get goose-bumps thinking about standing on the podium with a silver medal round my neck: the support I had from fans and people I have never met was overwhelming. I never wanted to be famous, I never wanted to be a star, but I always wanted to be recognised as a good horsewoman."

Although regular international eventing takes Piggy abroad, British events measure up well. "Eventing in this country takes you to some

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stunning places," she says. "Lots are at wonderful stately homes and parks. Burghley has always been one of my favourites as it is our local 4* star event. I love the event as a competitor but even when I am not competing I have loved it as a spectator, a shopper and someone who enjoys food!"

"At three-day events, we set up camp, the wagon becomes our home and I enjoy catching up with my eventing friends over dinner and a drink."

So where does Piggy see herself in the future? "The set-up I have now is massive; it's all I have dreamed of. A career in horses is all I have ever wanted to achieve, and now the London Olympic Games are my main aim; I am doing everything I can to get there.

"Eventing is an amazing leveller. There are more lows than highs, but the highs make it special and the sense of achievement makes you quickly forget everything else!"

This talented rider is clearly a family woman at heart and concludes: "I wouldn't change my life for the world, but I would like to see myself settled with a family one day." ●

Piggy is on the World Class Performance Programme, which is supported by Lottery & Exchequer Funding



LEFT: SILVER-MEDAL-WINNING PIGGY RIDING SOME DAY SOON AT THE EUROPEAN EVENTING CHAMPIONSHIPS, FONTAINEBLEAU, FRANCE, 2009

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