

French finds winning formula

Greenwich Park comes under the spotlight for the long-awaited Olympic Test Event where victory for Piggy French gives the home side a taste of glory prior to London 2012. AIMI CLARK reports



Sara Algotsson Ostholt and Mrs Medicott, fifth, relinquish their second place after the cross-country with five penalties during the two jumping phases

ALL eyes turned to Greenwich Park for the Olympic CIC** Test Event last week, where Piggy French pulled off the result that thousands of British eventing enthusiasts will be praying for in 12 months time, securing the gold medal position aboard DHI Topper W.

This pair was the runaway victors, finishing on their first-phase score to wind up 7.1 penalties ahead of Germany's Michael Jung and River Of Joy. "Winning isn't the be all and end all but we're all competitive riders. The idea was to get a feel for the place and it's nice to put a positive stamp on it," said Piggy.

Michael Jung said: "Greenwich is a wonderful place and this event has told us a lot."

Pippa Funnell secured the final podium place aboard Billy Shannon, the eight-year-old mare rising two places through the leaderboard with a clear round in both show jumping phases on the final day.

"It's been a unique experience and I've felt nothing but positive

vibes throughout. It's been a huge advantage to get a feel of the terrain – that will be a serious test next year," she said.

Clayton Fredericks secured fourth spot for Australia aboard Bendigo, while a rolled pole and one time penalty on show jumping day cost Sweden's Sara Algotsson Ostholt three places for fifth aboard Mrs Medicott.

A great spectacle

Piggy French started the event exactly where she intended to stay – in the lead.

Sue Benson's 2,800m cross-country track caused few problems, all bar seven of the 39 horses successfully answering the questions posed by the steep hills and tight turns.

Four duos clocked up 20 jumping penalties, while three failed to complete, Pastel L'anguillere refusing three times with Alberto Giugni and Sandra Auffarth parting company from Parancs at the Avenue Combination Corner (16).

Poland's Lukasz Kazmierczak was the only other faller, his fate

sealed at the first of two skinny brushers at fence 7ab. The latter combination was sited shortly after a sharp descent from the top of Greenwich Park.

"I hope they find a way to make that less punishing next year. The slopes here put Gatcombe's hills in the shade," commented William Fox-Pitt, 10th aboard Gaucho. "You need to be on a proper equine athlete who changes gear effortlessly and turns when you ask."

Only seven horses crossed the finish within the 5min 5sec time.

"The fences come up quickly and the ground level changes all the time so it's mentally as well as physically testing on horses," added Piggy French.

Pippa Funnell concurred: "I was a little out of my comfort zone but Billy Shannon ran quicker than she's used to and coped well."



Test event winner Piggy French – "I hope I haven't peaked a year too early"

A year too soon?

Piggy French suffered the only heart-stopping moment at the final trot up when DHI Topper W was sent to the holding box but passed on reinspection.

The Olympic format of two show jumping rounds was adhered to, the first to decide CIC** qualifications and the second the final individual result, DHI Topper W leaving every pole in its cups to secure gold.

"A lot can happen in 12 months," said Piggy. "Horses are great levellers – you can be up one minute and down the next. I hope I haven't peaked a year too early."

RESULTS

- 1, DHI Topper W (Piggy French, GBR), 34.7, 0, 0, 0 = 34.7;
- 2, River Of Joy (Michael Jung, GER), 41.4, 0.4, 0, 0 = 41.8;
- 3, Billy Shannon (Pippa Funnell, GBR), 44.1, 0.8, 0, 0 = 44.9.

SPOTLIGHT ON...

Joris Van Springel



THE CV of Joris Van Springel, 14th aboard Limestone, boasts Olympic, World and European Championships. He is still based in the small village of Retie, north Belgium, where he was born and raised by non-horsey parents and where he now owns a small farm. Joris, 48, juggles eventing with earning a living as a station master at his local railway, where he has worked for 30 years.

"It's good to do something different to horses as it's difficult

to make a living from them on the Continent," said Joris. "The railway lets me cut my hours back to part time and is very flexible in order to help me get to the Olympics."

Joris currently has six horses and his top rides are stabled locally with his sponsor, AA Sport Drinks. His 17-year-old son Owen is a keen rider, while his partner Miet Vanroy is also horsey.

"I couldn't do this without her. Reaching the top of the sport is difficult but staying there is even harder," added Joris.