

French trier

From Pony Club to Badminton, eventer Piggy French has been there, showing grit, determination and stamina!

PHOTOS: RICHARD FAULK; WORDS: HANNAH JOBSON



Piggy puts Headboard through his paces.

French flyer

Piggy could ride before she could walk, but it wasn't until she was 15 that she took up eventing for proper. From her first pony Sonny, through Pony Club, to becoming a member of the UK World Class Squad, a Young Rider team gold medalist and under-25 champion, being a top rider was all she ever wanted to do. "I was not very competitive as a young rider but once I'd had a little success I started to win more." After leaving school Piggy got jobs at yards around the country, mucking out stables and working with horses. In 2003, she got her big break when Flintlock II took her to Badminton.

Eventer uncovered

Name: Piggy French
Birthday: August 12, 1980.
Fave horse: "That's hard! They are all so different, but Done to Order was perhaps the most special because he was such a freak. He just wasn't a stereotypical eventer."
"Flintlock was also not a normal eventer type and he jumped round three 4* events clear."
"Paris is the most beautiful, lovely horse, both to ride and to handle, and I'm hopeful that in a few years' time he will be the best horse I've ever had."

Best part of eventing: "Everything, I love the showjumping!"
Worst part: "Seeing friends get injured."
Embarrassing moment: "I was lying in fourth place after the dressage at Windsor three-day event, and had walked the course five times but still managed to jump a fence backwards! I was eliminated and it was a very long walk home, I couldn't think of a good excuse either."
Idol: "Mary King - I used to follow her around at all the big events with my autograph book and camera - I was an eventing geek!"
Advice: "Remember to always be patient and work hard, you'll get there in the end."

Done to Order wasn't your typical event horse - but that didn't stop him!



Some headturner
Someday Soon, or Headboard, (originally Edward, but renamed Headboard as there was already a horse called Edward on the yard!) is quite sharp - his eyes were on stalks as H+P snapped him being groomed and tacked up! However, he settled down perfectly to his job and showed off over some huge fences. Piggy says in an event horse she looks for, "movement, the ability and technique over the jumps and, most importantly, the horse's attitude." It seems Headboard ticks all the boxes.

Expert answers:

Q Done to Order was not a regular event horse. What made him so special?
A. "At 15.2hh and always on a diet, food and competing were his top priorities! Done to Order had a massive fan club, he was very special and very competitive in his own right. His came alive at a competition and had a real will to win. Performing at an event he was a totally different horse, he had great presence and was super competitive, I think that is why he did so well, he had an enormous heart. He was accepted into eventing circles but I always found it amusing when people suggest he wasn't talented enough - he was just so successful."

Name: What A Performance (Edward)
Height: 16.3hh
Born: 1993
Temperament: Kind and easy to do, loves his food, so is always on a diet!
Strengths: Cross-country and his desire to please.
Aimed at: Badminton.



"I was not very competitive as a young rider but once I had a little success I started to win more."

Sporting ambitions

Sporting memories: "Long-distance running at school - I hated it!"
Sport on TV: "Rugby World Cup, the Olympics - not football though!"
Sporty action: "I played every sport I could, really."
Tough sport: "Eventing is 365 days a year, 24/7, whatever the weather. You can't think about a day off."
Top sport location: "Burghley."
Sporting hero: "Cricket!"
Sporting goal: "The Olympics - I was long-listed for the squad for Beijing but Paris went lame."



Headboard towers over Piggy but is a gentle giant.

Name: Someday Soon (Headboard)
Height: 17.3hh
Born: 1995
Temperament: Spooky, sharp but honest.
Strengths: Scopey and athletic.
Aimed at: 4* events.

Q One of your top horses, Paris, missed Badminton last year due to injury and you seem to have been quite unlucky with other horses. How do you cope with the disappointment?

A. "The more time you spend with horses, riding and competing, the more you realise that things like this happen - often! That doesn't make it any easier when it does happen though. You just have to accept it, move on and work extra hard on the other horses. It is harder when an injury or illness affects your top horse because it is not only you who is disappointed but the horse's owners too, you feel like you've let them down in a way. For example, Paris was bought from America and was only here six months before he had an injury, but it does happen and you have to pick yourself up and carry on."

Q What advice would you give to someone who is disappointed they can't always go riding or do horsey activities?

A. "Work hard with all non-horse related things, this will make it more likely for you to be able to do horsey activities when you want to. By being helpful and listening to your parents they will be more willing to help you, maybe by driving you to the stables or letting you have longer when you get there! When you aren't allowed to spend time with horses or ponies keep reading books and magazines and watching DVDs, you will always be learning."

Q Do you have any personal experience of disappointments?

A. "When I was 18 I had a horse called Cornerman - he was then given to Pippa Funnell to ride. I just had to accept it - Pippa was a much more experienced rider than me and it was the owners' decision. It was a hard blow but there was no point crying over it. I knew I had to focus on getting other good horses and improving as a rider myself."

