

'He's a freak of nature'

What makes some horses go the distance? Andrea Oakes delves into the background of three great equine competitors for clues about their athletic longevity

REACHING the very top takes time, so it's not unusual to see horses in their mid-teens riding high in the international rankings. While maturity and experience can give these older mounts a winning edge, the inevitable "miles on the clock" after years on the competition circuit can take their toll. Yet some horses just seem to keep on going. Do they stay so sound and fit because of the right genes, through careful management or by good luck — or perhaps a combination of all three factors? The owners, riders and vets of these former champions — all still going strong — reveal all...



The 'extraordinary' Lenamore never once saw the vet for lameness issues over the course of his 14-year career

LENAMORE
NICKNAME: Ed
AGE: 21
HEIGHT: 15.3hh
SIRE: Sea Crest
COMPETITIVE CAREER: Ed began eventing aged five, completing seven consecutive Badminton and five Burghleys (winning in 2010). He represented New Zealand at the World Equestrian Games (WEG, 2006), the Hong Kong Olympics (2008) and 2012 Olympics — winning team bronze at London aged 19. "When Ed arrived with us, as a four-year-old, he looked like a hat-rack," says owner Jane MacKinnon of the Irish draught-thoroughbred gelding. "He had a very mixed-up brain, but he was beautifully put together and he could tell he had talent. He did two three-day events a year, from six until he retired last year aged 20,

and never had anything wrong with him. "I think what helped was that we [Jane, her daughter Lexi and Ed's rider Caroline Powell] were meticulous about getting him fit — we never took any shortcuts. He came home at the end of each season for a holiday. In mid-November we would start walking him on the road every day for up to an hour and a half, sometimes more, before he returned to Caroline in January. "Ed was never fussy about his food and was far too good a doer, given half a chance. He was turned out every day, in all weathers, and he liked routine. The only thing he has had in latter years is a joint supplement. He was a once-in-a-lifetime horse." "Ed was extraordinary," agrees Caroline. "He was such a compact little unit and he knew how to look

after himself — he realised his boundaries and limitations. We never overran him and his legs were well iced after competitions, but he never saw a vet for lameness issues." After retiring at the age of 20, Ed is still fit, well and raring to go. He will be out hunting next season. **The vet's view** "LENAMORE was a tough horse with good conformation, strong feet and an amazing ability to recover," says New Zealand team vet Ollie Pynn. "It is unusual for a horse to last at that level, until that age, without major injury, but he was still going strong at the London Olympics. "He was always prepared very well for events. He and Caroline made the cross-country look easy, which I'm sure will have helped his longevity."



Mr President is 'built to last' — something Steph believes has helped him stay at the top

OVER TO YOU
NICKNAME: Jack
AGE: 26
HEIGHT: 16hh
SIRE: Over The River
COMPETITIVE CAREER: over 15 years. Jack won four European team gold medals, two Olympic team silvers and a WEG individual silver and team bronze. He completed Badminton seven times (five times finishing in the top 10). "Jack was a racing reject and as a youngster was a weedy thoroughbred — a weak, poor-looking thing," says his rider Jeanette Brakewell, who was later gifted him by Richard Holdsworth. "He was very well bred but built like a teapot, with a high head carriage and quite a dipped back. But he wasn't croup-high and he had excellent leg conformation. "He travelled easily over the ground and always landed well, which must have contributed to his soundness. He was quite sharp and was always a very fit horse. "At four, we discovered that Jack's heart missed a beat at rest. This didn't need treatment — maybe he has lasted so long because he hasn't used up so many of his heartbeats! "Jack was only ever lame twice.

He cracked a splint bone at Blenheim in 1997 and needed six weeks' box-rest. Then in 2002, the day after winning silver at WEG, he was hopping lame. He had a bone spur on his short pastern, under the coronet band, but he was sound by the end of the season. "I did nothing special with him, but kept him fit with plenty of hill work and never trashed him by running him on bad ground. Although not a weight carrier, he was easy to feed and never had supplements or calmers. He has been very low-maintenance. "Jack did his last championship aged 17 and finally retired from competition at 20. He's still in work and looks really well — he's a bit stiffer behind, but his legs are great. He was made of tough stuff — a one-off." **The vet's view** "JACK was a lovely sound horse to look after," says Andy Bathe, former GBR team vet. "He was naturally athletic and carried himself so well that he found the job easy. We really didn't have to do much with him — he was nicely unexceptional. If we could clone an event horse, from a veterinary point of view, it would be him."



Eventing team stalwart Over To You was never fed any extra supplements

MR PRESIDENT
NICKNAME: Rimmer
AGE: 20
HEIGHT: 16.1hh
SIRE: unknown
COMPETITIVE CAREER: after starting novice affiliated dressage aged four, Rimmer contested his first grand prix five years later. He competed internationally for GB, scoring more than 70% in his first World Cup qualifier in 2006. Officially retired last year, he still competes at grand prix. "Rimmer was bred for driving, by a Gelderland-hackney stallion and out of a Dutch warmblood mare," explains his owner and rider Steph Croxford. "He's built to last with the strong bone structure of a driving horse. I didn't buy him for dressage and he really shouldn't find it so easy. But, like a circus horse, he could do all the tricks. We weren't overstressing anything with the grand prix movements. "I have only ever schooled him three times a week, for 40min,

even when he was at the top of his game. We've always hacked, as I think it's so good for tendons and ligaments. Perhaps this work over mixed terrain has added to his longevity. "Until he was 15, Rimmer never had a day's lameness. Even when he developed suspensory desmitis in 2008, it didn't make him lame. [GBR team vet] John McEwen always said you must never take an old grand prix horse out of work, because if one wheel falls off, they all do. So rehab involved walking and trotting on the roads, in wind, rain, sun or snow until, a year later, he was back competing. "He then slipped while competing in Saumur and suffered collateral ligament damage, which took 12 weeks to heal. I think the travelling caused the problems in later life — the stop-start journeys across Europe in a herringbone-pattern lorry. He was never lame before we started competing internationally.

"Rimmer can go into a dormant state in competition, as if he knows he must rest, like a proper athlete. It's not until we do grand prix movements that the sparkle comes back, a bit like pressing the ignition switch. I used to give him a few holidays a year, but he got so restless that we ended up hacking for a couple of weeks instead. "He's a freak of nature." **The vet's view** "MR PRESIDENT was one of those characters that had a huge joy of life," says John McEwen. "He loved doing everything and had a great capacity to cope in any situation. "He might not have had the classic dressage physique, but he was incredibly strong in every way. With another rider he might have been ordinary, but Steph brought him to life. Horses can last a long time in the right hands — in my opinion the way Steph looked after him and managed his training and fitness regime made all the difference."