



Pictures by Trevor Meeks and David Miller

Onward bound: Jeanette and Over To You on the steeplechase in Jerez

# The pathfinder steers her course

After a fairytale rise to stardom, Jeanette Brakewell has long been a mainstay of the British team. But with her top ride turning 16 next year, what does the future hold for her? Ever pragmatic, she talks to **KATE GREEN** about her eventful year



Jeanette displays her medals from the 2002 WEG

and there's plenty for him to look at, which is always better for him. "Of course I would like to go to Athens, though — to help win the gold! But I know that it's going to be competitive. There are only five places, which is less than there is for any other championships, and a lot of up-and-coming riders and horses. Jack's age [16] is also a consideration and we need to do well at Badminton, but I think that if we do, then it would be hard to overlook us."

Over To You was broken-in by Irish rider Jonty Evans when he was working for the then owner, Fiona Clegg. The Irish-bred gelding, by Over The River, was bought for racing, but an irregular heartbeat ruled out that career option.

"He often misses a beat when resting," explains Jeanette. "But it's been monitored and I don't give it a second thought. He's got such a big heart that it has to work harder."

Jeanette's life-changing relationship with Over To You began when

**"In this sport, you have to take the good bits, because the next time you can be on the floor, which is exactly what happened to me"**

Fiona brought the four-year-old for lessons to Chris McGrann's northern yard where, as a school-leaver, Jeanette's natural talent was being honed by riding a variety of horses.

"I remember Fiona walking around the corner with the whole of her face black and blue because Jack had dumped her. He was quirky, sharp, would whip around the whole time and had the most almighty buck."

"In fact, he soon grew up and now he's an angel, just a bit cheeky when he's fit. But he still hates prams. I met one on the roads and tracks at Blenheim just before we sailed to Puchestown in September and it took me ages to get him past it."

Jeanette's eventing career subsequently blossomed: she notched up several placings during her employment with Anne and Lawrence Marshall before going solo with her own yard in Norfolk, and Richard Holdsworth bought Over To You for her.

Solid performances at Blenheim and Badminton launched a now legendary career with the British team, while her tidy seat and astute brain across country earned her many plaudits.

It all started in 1999, when eventing's annus

horribilis resulted in a clean sweep through the hierarchy. Mandy Stibbe, newly appointed as chairman of selectors, bravely decided on a s\*\*\*t-or-bust policy of new faces for her European Championship squad at Luhmühlen, where the British team, having been ignominiously disqualified from the 1998 WEG, had its last chance to qualify for the Sydney Olympics.

So emphatically have British team fortunes revived since then that most memories of that unhappy period have faded, but those who got up at an unpalatably early hour on Saturday morning in Luhmühlen to gather, green-faced, around a foggy water complex, will recall the tension as we awaited the appearance through the trees of Jeanette and Over To You, who were making their debut as team pathfinders. Their remarkably cool-headed and faultless clear under this huge pressure heralded the restoration of honour to the British team, which went on to beat Germany to gold by more than 100 points.

Medals at the Sydney Olympics (silver), Pau Europeans (gold) and 2002 World Games (bronze) followed. A sports-mad daughter of a Lancashire farmer, who left school at 16 to become an eventer, Jeanette's profile grew: she appeared on *Ready, Steady, Cook!* with William Fox-Pitt, posed naked — bar a saddle and a spray of silver paint — in the *Daily Mail*, and become the elegant face of Barbour.

And, after a decade of hard work, Lottery funding has definitely eased life.

**"Jack [Over To You] was quirky, sharp, would whip around the whole time, and had the most almighty buck...he still hates prams"**

"It means I can have more lessons and I don't have to do so much teaching, so that I can focus more on my riding."

Statistically, the team pathfinder rarely wins an individual medal; this is because, first, they can suffer from Thursday morning dressage-marking syndrome and, second, theirs can be a fact-finding rather than all-out run across country; but in the weirdly rollercoaster competition at last year's WEG, it was the number one who emerged best to win a much-deserved individual silver medal.

"I'm glad that happened after putting so much into the team. In this sport, you have to take the good bits, because the next time you can be on the floor, which is exactly what happened to me."

Jeanette is still unsure what went wrong at the Puchestown Europeans in September. Having swapped trailblazing roles with Leslie Law, she was enjoying a foot-perfect round as number two for the team when she and Jack missed their jerk at the island in the middle of the influential water complex and turned over.

"I've only seen the footage of our fall once, at a ball that evening. It happened so fast and all I know is that we didn't get the right take-off spot. Jack hadn't put a foot wrong for the team before and I felt so sorry for him. He doesn't like being on the floor; when he got up, he whinnied at me and my heart sank."

"But you have to put it in perspective: we



Clockwise from top: Jeanette with Rickadoo (left) and Running On Empty; with team manager Yogi Breisner; Jeanette riding out Rickadoo with Brook Staples on Daws Willowherb

help watching the big screen. Then, with the hold-up due to Austin's fall, it did get me on edge. But once I'd got into it, I was flying."

Punchestown was the culmination of a strange season. In April, Jeanette reappeared on the tabloid pages when, supporting her boyfriend Brook Staples in his dispute with Event Horse Owners Association chairman Tom Attwood over the ownership of Brook's Sydney ride, Master Monarch, she was involved in moving the horse out of the stables of his new rider, Andrew Hoy.

The incident had all the ingredients of a top jilly Cooper story: a love affair which had already caused astonishment and, in some quarters, huge disapproval; an argument over a horse and royalty even, because Master Monarch was residing in the Princess Royal's yard at Gatcombe.

As a result, Jeanette's participation at Badminton a few weeks later was bound to carry a certain "gawp factor". Many riders would have quailed at the exposure, but Jeanette seemed to sail above the storm and produced a wonderful performance on Over

came away with a fat knee and a team gold medal — Austin O'Connor lost his horse. And I knew I wasn't going to get an individual medal that time. I'd been very disappointed with our dressage, which was our worst ever.

"I tend to be fairly realistic. I'm only 29 and I hope I've got plenty of time in this sport in which to win some more medals with other horses."

Jeanette admits that not being first to go did feel strange. "I didn't mind, but it felt different. Normally, I don't have a clue what's going on with the cross-country, but this time I couldn't

◀ To You to finish third on her dressage score. "The Master Monarch business just made me concentrate more," she says. "I didn't think it was an 'issue', just something that should have been sorted out. Some of the things that were written did upset me, but it's all resolved and I've got no hard feelings about it."

"It happened. You live and learn. Brook

**"The Master Monarch business just made me concentrate more...It happened. You live and learn"**

and I wrote to the Princess to apologise, and all our owners were very supportive.

"At Badminton, I thought: 'I'm not going to let this bother me, and I really concentrated. It was our chance. I knew this Badminton was the one to have a crack at. I always aim to be in the top three and be the only one to finish on my dressage mark... I was just so pleased.'"

Jeanette reveals that one of the secrets of her concentration is not to read too much.

"I read all the opinions — I've followed the debate about the format of the sport — but I'm careful not to look at other bits. It can put things in your head. If you're criticised, it can knock your confidence, and if good things are written about you, it can make you cocky."

She admits, though, to being touched by a compliment from Lucinda Green who, when asked on television at Badminton which rounds had caught her eye, said that Jeanette's had stood out.

"When it's from someone I really respect, it is lovely. When I was a teenager, Lucinda was my heroine and I never thought I'd even meet her."

Presumably, Jeanette's ideal Christmas present would be another top ride as back-up for Jack.

"One more advanced horse would be nice, but I've still got to concentrate on the young horses. The more horses you have, the more staff you need and the more knackered

## THE BRAKEWELL STRING



Burley Wood, 14th at Bramham this year

### Advanced horses

**Over To You** — owned by Richard Holdsworth and long-listed for Athens

**Burley Wood** — aged 10, "a good cross-country horse", named after his breeder Joss Hanbury's Burley-on-the-Hill home, owned by Sarah Bulwer-Long and completed two three-stars



McGuigan on his way to a clear at Blenheim

### Chest Of Diamonds

— retired after a fall at Blair, his first three-star, but finished third at Burgie CCI\*\*

**McGuigan** — Alistair Holder's 10-year-old stallion, who went clear at Blenheim, his first three-star, and may do Saumur next. "He has a great temperament and hasn't put a foot wrong; next year, he will mostly be used for AI, which will give me more time with him. His flying changes need establishing because at the moment he gets a bit confused"

### Intermediates

**Sporting Gambler** — eight-year-old by Sportsnight, owned by Lizzie Roberts

**Lady Tiffany** — nine-year-old mare owned by Jeanette's Norfolk landlord, Harry Simpson, aimed at her first two-star this year, having been ninth at Hartpury CCI\*

### Novices

**Rickadoo** — a five-year-old by Ricardo Z. Owned by Gaye Bartle and first and second in British Young Event Horse classes. "He's perfectly bred, mostly Thoroughbred with a bit of warmblood, and he's just had his first cross-country schooling session, which didn't bother him"

**Running On Empty** — belongs to Mark Johnson and Yvonne Mott. He is seven, and will be aimed for Le Lion D'Angers

you get. I think it's important to keep the ratio right, otherwise you don't have time to educate the horses. What they need most is my time."

Twelve months ago, Jeanette and Brook moved into a beautiful old yard in Leicestershire that used to be a Greyhound training centre. They have a side each in the immaculate line of stables, and there is also an outdoor school, a cottage and a staff flat, plus ample acres for run-out.

The pragmatic approach just slips slightly, though, as Jeanette admits that she has to pinch herself to convince herself that everything that has happened to her — all her achievements — is real.

"It's what I've always wanted to do," she says simply. "But I try to keep it real by doing normal jobs like mucking out. In fact, I quite enjoy mucking out — it's thinking time." **H&H**