

- Sydney Olympics -

Those who subscribe to the magazine *Practical Horseman* were treated in November, 2000 to a dramatic cover photo of David O'Connor taking his victory lap after winning the individual Three-Day Eventing Gold Medal at the Sydney Olympics. In the picture O'Connor, wearing his scarlet coat with blue and white collar, holds his reins in his left hand while using his right arm to hold aloft his riding cap and his crop, to which is tied an American flag that streams out behind him. At first glance one sees a handsome and triumphant athlete at the pinnacle of his career.

The cover – based on the photo at the start of this chapter – suggests a more intriguing story. Splashed across O'Connor's chest, between his collar and the gold medal dangling from a blue ribbon around his neck is the magazine's headline – "Custom Made Gold!" Below the headline and the rider's body is the head of the pretty bay gelding that O'Connor rode – make that "teamed with" – to the Olympic win. As the headline suggests, the other athlete that shares the gold medal with David O'Connor is named Custom Made. It's the first Olympic gold for an American horse and rider since 1984, and David's face says it all – national pride, disbelief, and a sense of humility.

This great moment was shared retrospectively with a group of perhaps 70 horse people gathered at the National Sporting Library in Middleburg one November evening. The event was billed as "A Conversation with Olympians" and starred O'Connor and two of his three Virginia teammates, his wife Karen (riding Prince Panache) and Nina Fout (3 Magic Beans), who together with our neighbor Linden Wiesman (on Anderoo), had won the team Three-Day Event Bronze Medal as well.

As the program unfolded, highlighted by movies of the action, the intensity, difficulty and risks of high level three-day eventing became clear to those more accustomed to other aspects of horse sports.

Because of the huge variety of skills, training and experience necessary to bring a talented horse to the top level, event horses are much older than typical race horses, in the case of the US team ranging between 10 and 16 years. By the time a horse is 17 or 18 he tends to have lost enough to be unsuitable for international competition. Serious event riders need to have younger horses coming along behind their current stars, just as major league baseball teams have farm systems.

But there is far more to winning an Olympic equestrian medal than a horse and rider team bonding through intense training and competition, and then

navigating their way through a grueling three-day test of precision, courage, and endurance. As the O'Connors repeatedly emphasized, a winning Olympic team is made up of many elements. Karen puts it this way:

"Competing in the Olympic Games is a privilege unparalleled by any other experience I have ever had. Every athlete that participates shares a sense of patriotism for one's country. David and I have both been fortunate enough to win medals. When you stand on the podium to receive your medal, you are overwhelmed by the sensation of all the people standing there with you. You are the lucky one that receives the medal. You occupy the hallowed ground the Olympic podium provides you, for your moment in time."

"But, there are literally the tens of people directly involved, the thousands of

people indirectly involved, not only the O'Connor Event Team, but also the US Equestrian Team, and of course there are the millions of people that are there through their association with the US Olympic Committee and the USA itself.

"All are sharing in that awe-inspiring sensation of success in the Olympic movement. The Olympic Games encompass a world-

wide appreciation of the level of excellence the champions have achieved, which is recognizable by hundreds of millions of people, regardless of your sport or country. No one stands there alone.

"The key to success in our sport is teamwork. Teamwork is the ability to make every person feel that his or her effort is vital to the success of the mission. For David and me, our mission is sustained competitive excellence throughout not only an Olympic quadrennial, but over multiple Olympic cycles. Everyone's job is crucial to success."



Karen O'Connor on Travis – show jumping locally



"To that end, teamwork is never more profoundly demonstrated than in the partnership between horse and rider. The horse, for which we owe so much, has always been there for man as a team player. The horse has had such an amazing impact on civilization itself. In today's modern world he is enjoyed by millions as a wonderful friend and sporting companion. And so our plight continues: to understand the language of the horse."

This brings us to those often unseen but essential members of the extended team – the horse owners. It is unusual when a skilled rider also has the pocketbook to own several expensive event horses. So, perhaps half or more of Olympic-caliber horses are owned by someone other than the rider. At Sydney only Nina Fout and Linden Wiesman rode and trained their own horses. The team was lucky to have Jacquie Mars as owner and sponsor of two Olympic horses – Prince Panache and Giltedge, David's horse in the team contest.

Horse owners were clearly critical to the success of the Olympians, and the



Nina Fout competing locally

PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

applause given Jacquie at the Library showed that everyone there knew it. And all the other owners, whether of Olympic horses or those against whom they compete to get to the top, are also contributors to Olympic success. Competition is what brings out the best in the best. The Olympians were quick to note also the help that Jim Wofford had been to them during their careers, even though he was not part of the group in Australia.

The Olympic team depended on Chef d'Equipe Mark Phillips in the role of non-riding coach and Jim Wolfe to handle administration and logistics. Since the riders were all highly experienced, Mark's job was to keep them focused on the work at hand, and to see to it that each entered the course or ring at a peak of confidence and determination to have the best possible round.

Juliet Graham sees the ideal management structure slightly differently: *"The Chef d'Equipe need not necessarily be the Coach. In some cases the Chef d'Equipe handles the paperwork – hotels, cars, transportation;"* all the logistical details of a large group of people living and working far from home. She continues:

"The Coach does the horses and riders, fitness programs and focus for both. And there may be a sports psychologist involved. The game is so fine-tuned that the riders must have their minds in the right place. You get to the Olympics by years of concentrating on an objective. Then the 'elite athlete syndrome' comes into play. You suddenly realize 'Holy S---, THIS IS THE OLYMPICS,' and all sorts of distractions rise up in your face. You need someone to help you resist them and stay focused."

As Juliet implies, media pressure can be intense. At Sydney a tutorial was held for the US riders to help them in handling media contacts.

What the coach does for the riders, the grooms do for the horses. There may be four horses that will compete, and another four as spares. At one groom to a horse – the normal ratio – that's eight grooms. Backing them up will be vets (three at Sydney for the whole USET), a farrier, perhaps a horse masseuse. Feed and equipment companies will have specialists along, to help with nutrition and tack and for the publicity they receive. And then there are the officials of the Olympics and of the relevant national horse associations. So the extended team will have several times as many support people as there are riders competing.

Putting such an organization in place, and maintaining it in a foreign country for some weeks calls for funding well beyond what Olympic horse owners can give. So sponsors and individual donors are essential. Nina Fout estimates the cost of sending a horse and rider to Sydney at \$40-50K or more. Without those many, many supporters the results at Sydney would not have been



possible. But with them it was a great team effort, and a huge stimulus for Three-Day Eventing in America.

Two years later, Nina sums it up:

"What was the greatest thrill? Just being there, one of only four compared to all the thousands of eventers who didn't have a chance to go. Sydney was one of the best sites ever, incredibly well organized, great national pride, real sportsmen. It was a wonderful way to start the new century. In a neutral political climate we all felt safe – it was just perfect."

"Would you like to do it again?"

"I'd love to. But you have to be realistic. If it comes, it comes. You have to have the right horse to do it."

- Next Stop, Jerez -

In geologic time there is only an instant between the American success of 2000 at Sydney, and the next international team challenge, the World Equestrian games at Jerez, Spain, in 2002. Two centuries ago Napoleon's army traveled to Spain, among other places, on its stomach. Today's American eventing teams also travel on "bread" – in this case the financial contributions of private supporters, rather than their home government as may be the case in other lands.

This August evening our neighbors had a chance to see their local eventing heroes in action in one of the tests that will determine the makeup of our team in Spain. About a dozen "short list" American riders, some with more than one horse, and a few international visitors, held a show jumping element of this trial in a ring conveniently located behind Virginia Gunnell's house, Banbury Cross, just east of Middleburg. The invitation to attend, and share the Gunnell hospitality as well as watch the jumping, made clear that this was a fund-raiser through which locals should show their support for the people who in 2000 had placed our horse country in the first rank of world equestrianism. Several hundred were there, check books in hand, to do so.

The course was designed and then described to the crowd by Sally Ike. Brian O' Connor (David's brother) announced the horses and riders, as he does regularly at such events.

The horses and riders performed with professional smoothness over Sally's tight circuit of challenging jumps. The crowd was knowledgeable and appreciative. After the event Middleburg Mayor Tim Dimos made cogent observations about the contributions of these riders and horses to our community,

and the need for supporting them. Then the riders were given awards, after which they mixed effortlessly with the crowd, which included in many cases their parents, coaches, friends, or acquaintances from eventing, showing, fox-hunting, steeplechasing or even yesterday's Pony Club.

It's a long way to the 2004 Olympics, but Middleburg, The Plains, Upperville and adjacent parts of our Community of the Horse plan to get us there in fighting trim.

The only complaint, a muted one, came from the photographers – professionals like Janet Hitchen and Betsy Parker, and amateurs such as the author – that the overcast evening light was a little weak for shooting at 1/800 of a second.



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

A fundraiser for the USET Eventers at Banbury Cross

To my knowledge none of the broader audience cared a whit for that optical inconvenience. They were too busy enjoying each other and their special connection to international equestrian stardom.

EPILOGUE

A few weeks later the US Eventing team of David O'Connor, Amy Tryon, Kim Vinoski and John Williams won the Gold Medal at Jerez. And as Karen O'Connor pointed out, everyone that had been at Banbury Cross was at Jerez in spirit.

