



Harry Meade has been all over the media since his amazing come-back from a serious fall that threatened to end his riding career. We caught up with Harry to talk about his journey into eventing and how he managed to overcome adversity to finish third at the toughest Badminton in years

COME-BACK KING

Son of eventing legend Richard Meade, Harry grew up in a family steeped in equestrian tradition. "We started riding at an early age. And although my father had already finished competing when I was very small, we had a lot of riders based with us," Harry recalls. "Matt Ryan, Lucinda Fredericks and Chris Hunnab, among others, were all based at our yard; it was like having an extended family and was very inspiring to see them go on to the top of the sport."

Harry, and his older brother and younger sister all "rode madly" during childhood. "We hunted and went to Pony Club but our parents weren't overly keen that we should do anything other than have fun. We weren't going off to have lessons every week, we just learnt to ride naturally."

Although there was never any pressure for Harry to

succeed, he admits to being naturally competitive, and winning the Pony Club Championships in 1999 proved to be a turning point. The win was followed by selection for the British Team for the European Championships, and Harry was hooked. In spite of achieving straight-As at school and gaining a degree from Bristol University, he was determined that eventing was to be his chosen career.

Even with his sights set on a future with horses, Harry still had to work his way through the ranks to earn his own credentials, starting out by heading to Madrid to work for showjumper and six-time Olympian, Luis Álvarez de Cervera; now showjumping coach to the New Zealand Eventing Team. Harry also worked on a dressage yard in Austria and with the late William Mifflin before heading to William Fox-Pitt's yard in 2003-2004.

Having done his apprenticeship and gained the skills

needed to succeed, Harry took the plunge and set up on his own yard, aged 21. "From the start I was riding for other people. I took on all types of horses to learn as much as I could in the hope that, sooner or later, if a good one came my way I'd be capable of getting the best out of him."

"In the early days, opportunities usually came in less glamorous forms. Often bringing on youngsters or someone wanting their daughter's pony to be sold. But I was always mindful that I was offering a service to owners. All the time I was trying to do the best job possible for each owner and I kept learning throughout."

Harry's work began to pay off. He had broken into 3* ranks when Carolyn Lissack offered him the ride on a 14-year-old called Midnight Dazzler. That was the good news; the bad news was that Bobby, as he was known, came with a considerable reputation.

"When Bobby came to me, he'd already been ridden by Katie Burton, Darrell Scaife and William Fox-Pitt and I had very managed expectations. Although he had been ridden by a lot of experienced riders, he was renowned for being difficult and could be an erratic jumper."

Reading Harry's tribute to Midnight Dazzler (who died last year in retirement) on his website, it is apparent that the above is something of an understatement, since the horse

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had some serious issues and Harry was advised not to take him on. As an ambitious young rider, however, he was up for the challenge.

Before long, the pair clicked and Midnight Dazzler and Harry went on to become one of the most consistent combinations on the circuit, completing seven consecutive CCI 4* events together without ever having a jumping fault across country. Midnight Dazzler's best results came with an eighth at Burghley in 2007 and 10th at Badminton in 2009 at the age of 19.

Harry's tribute to "the horse that made my career" is suitably touching: "Bobby had the most amazing presence; he received a cheer from the crowd at every horse inspection, usually before he had even been passed. He had character, class, speed and was probably the scopiest horse I will ever sit on. I felt like I could have jumped the moon on him. Most importantly, he adored his job."

The true success of any horseman comes when the horse that 'made' them moves on to green pastures and Harry was all set to maintain his presence on the eventing circuit.

"I was riding a mare for a breeder for free on the basis that when we sold her we'd split the proceeds. She was sold for £20,000 and I put my half into a gangly, raw four-year-old called Wild Lone, who I bought out of a dealing yard. He was advertised as a possible hunter but I liked his type and

Above left: Against all odds: Harry competed at Badminton 2014 - and grabbed third place

Above: Harry in hospital after a life changing fall saw him break both elbows in 2013

athleticism. By the time he was six, I was pretty sure he would one day be a 4* horse. He is honest, trusting, consistent and reliable; everything you want in an event horse."

Life-changing fall

A reality for the professional rider is the possibility of being injured and in August 2013, Harry headed off to Wellington Horse Trials, little imagining that he would face a life-changing fall.

Harry was competing with Shannondale Santiago in the Advanced when they had a rotational fall that catapulted him into the ground head first. Landing with straight arms, they locked and snapped backwards at the elbows, dislocating and shattering in the process.

In that moment, Harry's life changed. He was taken to hospital where his arms were encased in plaster and suspended – he was stuck in a static position for over three months. Harry underwent four operations where surgeons tried to reconstruct his arms by pinning and plating the broken fragments together.

One elbow in particular, was so badly smashed that the surgeons struggled to rebuild it and there were serious doubts as to whether the bones would ever heal, the state of the shattered bone being likened to "grains of sand" by one surgeon.

What lay ahead was months of ongoing treatment, surgery and physiotherapy, with Harry completely dependent on others for even the simplest tasks.

"It's hard to describe what it's like being unable to do anything at all for yourself," he explains, "and of course your entire business is in danger of collapsing because you can't do your job. Rosie, my wife, is a school teacher but had to take unpaid leave

to look after me. Timing couldn't have been worse, with a young child and another on the way at that time."

In spite of the uncertainty over whether his elbows would ever heal well enough for him to ride again, Harry refused to give up hope. "I'm quite a determined and positive person; being told there's a 90 percent chance of not healing, all I hear is there's a 10 percent chance of being fine and I'm

going to be in that! By nature, I tend to work very hard, plan everything and throw myself into it and I wanted to give my body the very best chance of recovering.

"As soon as I was discharged from hospital, I spent as much time as possible in a hydrotherapy pool to try and regain some movement in my arms. This was followed by several months in the rehabilitation gym at Bath University, where the trainers had to be fairly inventive in order to keep my upper body active, since most machines require the use of one's arms."

Four months after the accident, Harry faced a devastating blow. After being called in for what he thought was a routine check-up, his surgeon told him that the

latest x-rays had shown that the fractures in his right arm were not healing and were now unlikely to do so. The only option was to replace the elbow with a prosthetic joint.

However, the chances of continuing a career in eventing with an artificial elbow were remote. With the operation booked in two day's time, the clock was ticking and Harry and Rosie were faced with the hugely difficult dilemma of whether or not he should "go under the knife and beyond the point of no return". After seeking out further advice and emergency consultations, Harry cancelled the operation, choosing to continue as he was, with unhealed fractures, but without

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Facing page: Harry 'trotting up' Wild Lone

Centre: Harry having cryotherapy

Below: Harry Meade in action at Badminton 2014 - showjumping



shutting the door on his career.

Setting himself targets with renewed determination, Harry's rehabilitation continued with cryotherapy, a treatment championed by the likes of AP McCoy. Designed to increase blood flow and improve healing, the process involves enduring temperatures of -140° Celsius followed by massage and hydrotherapy – an extreme form of hot and cold treatment.

By January, and with a new season looming, Harry was secretly plotting his return to the saddle. "I was desperate to get back on board, even though I still had fractures in my arms. I just needed to see whether the arms would stand up to riding in its most elementary form."

High hopes

After five minutes in the saddle, Harry was convinced that he had enough to work with, but he hadn't fought against the odds for so many months in order to simply ride again – all immediate efforts were channelled towards building up to Badminton. Despite this seeming unbelievably far-fetched to Rosie and Jess, Harry's wife and head groom – the only two people who knew he was planning a come-back – he set about planning both his own and his horses' fitness for the coming season. Initially, Harry's team took on Wild Lone's basic fitness training while he gradually built up the time that he himself spent riding.

"There were rumours that Badminton was going to be really tough this year and, having been out of the saddle for so long, my own fitness preparation was going to be just as important as Wild Lone's."

A fortnight before Badminton Harry competed five horses in one day: "I hoped that if I could cope with that, I'd be in good enough shape to tackle Badminton."

The following week Harry and Wild Lone made the short journey of five miles from his Cotswold yard to the world's

premier event. "I was very relaxed all week at Badminton. In many ways I felt that making it to the starting line had exceeded the odds so anything else was a bonus; there was no pressure and I was able to enjoy every moment of it."

Wild Lone did his dressage in heavy rain but produced his best test to date. "When I walked the course it was clearly very tough and I knew it was likely to separate the field. Watching the first lot of horses on the screens in the riders' tent was like watching an old *Thrills and Spills* video of bygone Badminton! It was the kind of year I'd been waiting for so I couldn't wait to get out there."

This is Harry's tenth season with Wild Lone and they clearly know and trust each other implicitly. "He was a star and ate up the course, putting us in eighth place overnight."

Harry had hoped for a difficult showjumping course and it was just that, Wild Lone jumped superbly, having just one fence down to take third place.

After his incredible come-back from such challenging times, does Harry truly appreciate the scale of his achievement to finish third in the world's biggest event? "It was such a remote possibility that I was even going to be competing at Badminton this year, I was just living in the present and not dreaming about what might be. Now that it's over it feels like a fairytale result. The past year has been a rollercoaster journey of struggles and emotions, but thankfully it is one with a very happy ending!" ●

More info

Thanks to Coolex Technical Horsewear for its help in providing this interview. Harry is always looking for new horses, owners and sponsors to join his team. For more information visit www.harrymeade.com/www.wefi.co.uk





fastfacts

COLD COMFORT

Cryotherapy is a treatment designed to increase blood flow and improve healing. The process involves enduring temperatures of -140° Celsius followed by massage and hydrotherapy - an extreme form of hot and cold treatment.



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