

HARRY MEADE

# Olympic dreams

**Marianne Sweet** meets one man whose business could be his launch pad to Olympic glory, and potentially a very sound investment.

**M**ake no mistake Olympic hopeful Harry Meade has one principal objective - to win gold in 2012.

Everything he does, everything he considers, is carefully evaluated to ensure it fits in with that ambition.

That goal is also at the heart of his business. Unlike other sports, event riders must balance running a business with the demands of competing.

"If you reach the top of the sport then other areas of your business will thrive. Competing and winning must be at the core of everything," explains the 27-year-old from Gloucestershire.

Harry grew up surrounded by eventing stars and champion riders. His father, Richard, was a legendary horseman who won three Olympic gold medals. And he is close friends with Prince William and Harry, and a guest at the recent Royal Wedding.

It is an expensive sport. A top event horse can cost from £15,000 to prices in six figures, depending on age and experience. "I always knew if I were to event I'd have to run my yard as a business," he said. "My parents made it clear that they were never going to own my horses."

He has scrambled his way up the ranks on borrowed horses, most notably a black gelding called Midnight Dazzler who he was introduced to in 2003 and with whom he forged a partnership lasting seven seasons.

At the age of 18 he competed in the Junior European Championships. Since then, he has set a record for completing the world's two biggest events, the Mitsubishi Motors Badminton Horse Trials and the Land Rover



**WINNING PARTNERSHIP:** Harry Meade riding Midnight Dazzler in the dressage at the Mitsubishi Badminton Horse Trials 2010 and during the Dressage at The Land Rover Burghley Horse Trials in the HSBC FEI Classics Series 2009

Burghley Horse Trials, more times than any rider has ever done by the age of 25.

His proudest moment so far was receiving the Armada dish - given to riders for five Badminton completions. "I was told that I was the youngest person ever to have won the Armada dish, in the 60 year history of the event. Badminton is the Wimbledon or Tour de France of eventing, so that was incredibly humbling and satisfying."

A big boost came with selection for the World Class development squad, a Lottery-funded programme run by UK Sport. It helps riders with training and performance management, anything to benefit the athletes' development.

As part of this Harry met business advisers to determine how to develop his operation. He decided to keep the yard small, charge a competitive rate for livery (keep of the horses) yet give the horses the very best in training, feed and living conditions. "This inevitably means there is minimal profit. The livery is washing its face, breaking even and that is all it needs to do.

"I keep my prices at a modest level to be competitive and attract more owners with good horses. Through having good owners you have good horses and the principle objective is to compete and win."

He believes lower charges will give him the opportunity to ride better horses, leading to greater success, enhancing the potential earning power of the other branches of his business: sponsorship, training clinics, merchandise, and support his primary ambition - winning Olympic gold.

But he must manage to juggle the demands of training and competing with running a business. This includes liaising

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with the owners (of the horses) sponsors, managing staff and training other horses in the Wiltshire yard ([www.harrymeade.com](http://www.harrymeade.com)). "I ride for six to seven hours a day, while I am out the emails don't stop, the phone keeps ringing, the business keeps going."

The West Littleton yard is a relatively small affair with 15 horses and five employees. His head groom, Karen Hughes, worked for Australian Olympic medallist Andrew Hoy and is one of the most respected grooms on the eventing circuit. Harry's decision to take on an experienced and expensive head groom enables him to leave the yard's management to Karen, allowing him to work in other areas of the business.

He is aided by a part time PA, Sarah, but it is clear that this job requires a plethora of skills including marketing, the managing of investors and staff, purchasing and sales, not to mention equestrian skills.

The 27-year-old has worked hard to maintain his sponsors during the economic downturn. "Instead of having a flippant

relationship where you simply wear their branding I work with a smaller number of sponsors and have a more pro-active relationship. In essence I feel like I become a part-time employee.

"A lot of sportsmen regard sponsors as benevolent donors, but I try to work as hard as I can for them. It is important to me that their investment is just that - a positive investment. I want them to benefit as much as possible so that at the end of the year they want to keep working with me, not in a philanthropic way, but because they see a return on their investment. Our sponsors have stayed around, they are keen to keep going each year." Harry's sponsors range from small family firms to the corporate giant HSBC.

A considerable part of his time is spent scouring the UK, and Europe, for young horses then pairs them with an owner and trains them up to top level. He started investing in horses at the age of 18. "I trained and competed an owner's horse for free on

the basis that when it sold I would take half the value," he explains. "It sold for £20,000 and I was able to buy my first young horse, which I produced and sold on to an owner who kept it on with me, and it went from there."

Even then Harry was disciplined. The money he made from the sale of each horse was set aside to reinvest in another horse - not used in another part of the business.

"Horses and owners are the core of the business. When we see a good horse we need to try and buy it. To succeed in competition you must have the very best of horses trained to reach their full potential.

"Finding a good horse is difficult. It's the equestrian equivalent to the buying department of a premiership football club - we have agents scouting for young horses that we hope to buy at an affordable price before their talent becomes too evident and their price too high. Every two or three weeks I am off looking for the best young stock. The horses that turn out well will be sold to owners who wish the horse to stay and be competed by me. Those that do not make the grade will be put on the market and sold to another rider, still at a profit."

He speaks passionately about buyers who exploit both horses and owners to make a fast return. He believes that integrity pays its dividends, though at a slower pace.

Harry has been running his business for 10 years and is now looking for a partner who can help take it to a new level. "I would like to apply the same process that we've used in the past, using our expertise in buying raw talent and developing it on a larger scale. I would like to buy more horses and not be so restricted by budget. Historically we have had consistent growth, but I would like to work with a business partner who would enable us to operate on a bigger scale.

"The investment is relatively safe as it is spread over different horses. I would like to think we could offer a competitive return on the investment, and it would be more interesting and fun than a lot of ventures! There are several different sides to our business so I would also like to have the experience of working with a mentor."

**WORK AND PLAY:** (Top) Harry Meade on Midnight Dazzler at the Badminton Horse Trials, 2009, and relaxing at at The Lakes by Yoo, Fairford, Gloucestershire, with his trusted lurcher Snip and (bottom right) with wife Rosie

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