

Flora Harris

Her Bramham win may have surprised some, but Flora Harris has a system that means this result should not be a one-off. Ellie Hughes finds out about her training and mind-set



Flora at home near Marlborough with (left-right) Cooley Lord Lux, Billy Bandit, Cesano H, Bayano and Amazing VIII

TO an outsider, Flora Harris' win at Bramham may have come as a surprise; one of those eventing anomalies that spring up from time to time and make the sport so compelling. But spend five minutes in her company and it quickly becomes apparent that this CCI3* victory was no fluke. The 27-year-old is one of a new generation of young British stars who are talented, hungry and — thanks to the right support — have the means to deliver. She knows exactly what she's done, how much work it has taken to get there and where she will go from here. "We've been so close before, so this feels like a major milestone," she says, reflecting on her achievement a fortnight later over a cup of tea in the cosy tack room at

Baydon House Farm, the Wiltshire yard she moved into last winter belonging to eventing enthusiasts, Brook and Sally Johnson. "I'm thrilled for so many people; everyone feels the disappointments, not just me." The last sentence is a nod to her hitherto rollercoaster spring which, among other lowlights, included Amazing VIII injuring a tendon at Badminton and a less-than-satisfactory trip across the Irish Sea to Tattersalls. In Ireland, Flora had pulled out all the stops in the dressage, leading the CIC3* with Cesano H on a score of 35.9 and lying second in the CCI3* on Bayano with a 37.4, but then it all went horribly wrong. Cesano found the whopping ditches too much to stomach, while "Barney" developed a dislike of left-handed corners. "Bayano's cheekiness took me by surprise," she admits. "It wasn't a



Amazing VIII, who is currently off work with an injury, could be a future team horse for Flora

big issue to resolve, but at the time it felt like a total catastrophe." So how did she turn her luck around two weeks later? "I did all the same things; I was calm, focused and I had a plan, but at Bramham I had more aggression and more drive. I was hungrier," she says, gritting her teeth as if to illustrate the point.

The mental game FLORA makes no secret of the fact that, in the past, her mental game has let her down — at her first CCI3* at Blenheim in 2009 she was eliminated in the dressage for going wrong three times — but she has come a long way since then. She credits progress in this area to her mentor, human performance coach Jon Pitts, who she met by chance seven years ago. "Jon's helped me with every aspect of my career and together we've developed a structured system that

DAILY TIMETABLE

7.30am Flora starts the day by schooling one or two horses while the girls muck out.

9am the team meet in the tack room for breakfast and to make a plan for the day.

9.15am leg check — each horse is led out of its box and Flora and Charlotte cast their eyes over it for signs of general well-being and run their hands down its legs.

10am Flora spends the next three hours hacking, galloping or jumping. "I do 95% of the riding myself. I like the horses to work the way I want them to and I need to be able to spot anything amiss."

1pm a quick break for lunch.

2pm the afternoon is spent travelling to nearby yards to ride other people's horses and training other riders.

6pm three times a week Flora goes for a run: "I'm a member of the gym at The Injured Jockeys Fund centre at Oaksey House, but I prefer to run in the country and take the dog." She also has a daily exercise routine, developed for her by Jon Pitts, to improve her core strength.

7pm evenings are spent doing admin, communicating with owners and answering emails.



Everything a professional could wish for: Flora's well-equipped yard includes 12 huge boxes

helps me to plan, focus and deliver a performance when it matters," she says.

An important part of this system is a little black notebook that accompanies Flora and Jon on course-walks.

"The girls call it my book of power," she laughs. "I fill in one a year; it's always the same make — black, lined, moleskin — and in it I write down everything we discuss on the way round; from the lines I should be riding to my mind-set."

Flora's carefully honed focus does not stop when she gets off a horse; a self-confessed YouTube addict, she spends her evenings watching clips of sporting triumphs and interviews with her heroes, such as AP McCoy and Dave Brailsford, the mastermind behind the phenomenal success of the British

track cycling team.

"A while back I watched a documentary about Team Sky and what it takes to win the Tour de France; I couldn't sleep afterwards," she admits. "I lay awake at night, my mind whirring, thinking I could apply this to eventing, and offer that to my owners..."

Like all well-trained professionals, Flora refuses to take all the credit for her recent success. Crucial to her operation are head girl Charlotte Aitken, who has been with her for four years, and her trainers, Andrew Fletcher and Jeremy Scott.

Her outstanding performances in the dressage phase this year, which included being best of the Brits (in fourth place) on Thursday at Badminton are, says Flora, down to Andrew.



"I love all three phases but I particularly love the dressage": Flora schools Billy Bandit at home



Above: Flora pops Cesano H over a fence — "I do 95% of the riding myself — I need to be able to spot anything amiss"

Below: Flora with her Bramham spoils in the cottage she shares with Jeremy Scott, her boyfriend and showjumping trainer

"I love all three phases, but I particularly love the dressage, and that's Andrew's influence. He's trained me to train horses; to understand their physical mechanics and overcome mental barriers. It sounds a bit clichéd, but I feel like I'm on the bottom rung of an enormous ladder — there's so much more to learn."

Jeremy, Flora's showjumping trainer, is also her boyfriend. "We work brilliantly together, though Jeremy might not always agree," she laughs. "He's been such a huge support. He's at Hickstead today helping a few other riders, but he'll be back this evening, brimming with new ideas for us to try out tomorrow."

Flora and Jeremy live in a little cottage at the end of the drive at Baydon House Farm. As Flora spent no longer than a year at her three previous yards, you get the impression that she is looking forward to some permanency. The yard certainly has everything a professional could wish for — 12 huge boxes, an indoor and outdoor arena, an undercover horse walker and plenty of off-road hacking and hills.

Moving up the grades UNUSUALLY for a top rider,

smiles. "I had quite a high opinion of myself when I left school, but that was quickly quashed when I realised just how much I didn't know."

As with so many other aspiring young riders, Gill furnished Flora with the skills to turn a passion into a career. She ditched the idea of university and moved back home to Somerset to start building her string.

Some eye-catching results followed, especially with Jane Keir's bouncy little chestnut, Law Choice (Bobs). The pair won Osberton CIC2* in 2008 and the 2010 Express Eventing final at Stoneleigh. A year later, Bobs gave Flora her first taste of four-star competition at Badminton.

"He gave me the most incredible ride, but sadly he damaged a tendon in the process," she says.

Bobs was put down two years later after the injury reoccurred in training.

Waiting in the wings at that time was Bayano, an impossibly handsome five-year-old owned by Flora's mother, Caroline, and — since the beginning of this year — Rebecca Salt.

"I spent ages looking for a youngster," remembers Flora. "Originally I'd fallen for another horse from the same yard in Holland, but he had failed the vetting. I remember thinking that Bayano wasn't as nice, but that he'd be a good commercial horse if he wasn't good enough for me."

Aside from a few cross-country glitches, Barney has made relatively smooth progress through the levels. "He was terribly nervous at the

beginning; he'd cock his head and look at you suspiciously out of the corner of his eye, but with time he has blossomed into the most wonderful character.

"I remember his first BE90 at Swalelife in the mud; he cruised around totally effortlessly and gave me the most incredible feeling."

Flora currently only competes four horses from home, although she hopes that Amazing will be back next year.

"I've got a young advanced horse called Cooley Lord Lux, who is owned by Caroline Paul [and was formerly ridden by Laura Collett], plus Katherine Coleman's lovely seven-year-old Billy Bandit, who will be aimed at a CCI2* at the end of the year, but I'd love a few more rides," she says.

Aside from raising her profile, the most significant upshot of Flora's Bramham triumph would be a call-up to this autumn's European Championships at Blair Castle where, as host nation, Britain has 12 places.

"Of course I'd love to go," she says. "If it happens we'll be ready, but if it



Above: Flora (centre) rides out with Summer Bright (left) and head girl Charlotte Aitken, who has been with her for four years

doesn't we'll stick to plan A, which is Blenheim eight- and nine-year-old CIC3* followed by another CCI3*, probably at Boekelo." One thing's for certain; this girl won't be resting on her laurels. "Bramham's given me a taste of

the big time and I want more," she says. "I want to be consistently at the top winning medals. It's not about dreaming anymore; I've built good foundations and I have the right people around me, now it's up to me to deliver." H&H

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