

The eventing groom

The winner of the 2018 Badminton grooms' prize Charlotte Aitken on clifftop dressage and keeping calm under pressure

I've been grooming for 24 years and I still love it. To keep the passion alive it's so important to have "work time" and "me time". I enjoy spending time at the Compton Harriers Running Club and training for marathons, and my partner Rich and I go on adventurous winter holidays. Having a varied life is my key to enjoying grooming for so long.

Most of my childhood was spent at Bradfield Riding School near Newbury. I started riding there when I was five and they couldn't keep me away. At weekends and in the holidays Mum would drop me there in the morning and I would hang out for the day.

I started grooming when I left school at the age of 16; first in a pony eventing yard, then freelancing before going to work for eventer Daisy Berkeley, which

I loved. I left there to go travelling and I've been working for Flora Harris ever since I returned seven years ago. We spend so much time together that we are best friends, as well as employee and employer.

While I was travelling, I spent time working for Nick and Tash Brooks in New Zealand. Eventing there is very laid-back and quite different from eventing in the UK — but not in a bad way. I remember one event where the dressage was on the top of a cliff, overlooking the sea. It was an amazing experience — some of the world's best event riders grew up and started there, so to see what it is like was incredible.

All the horses on Flora's yard are special, but Barney (Bayano) is a little bit extra special for me as I have been at every single event he has ever gone to, from his first

BE90, where he stood on my hand — it looked like I had an egg under the skin — to seeing him come safely through the finish line on Saturday at Badminton this year.

Three-days are the best part of my job. I love the adrenalin on the Saturday, the whole excitement of it and making my horses look beautiful. Grooming at a big three-day is all about the organisation — get the numbers sewn on the day before and the studs and ice ready ahead of time. Your rider has enough to worry about, so you need to be as unstressed and as organised as possible. You won't see me without my rucksack, full of essentials like brushes and treats.

It sounds like such a cliché, but all our horses are really well-mannered. They all have their

quirks, but I enjoy looking at the babies and thinking, "I can't wait until this one is five years older as he is going to be really special."

At the final trot-up this year I was told that I was on the shortlist for the grooms' prize. I thought, "Crikey, I'm never going to win." Every single groom works their horse to be beautiful, so I never expected it to be me. I took Barney back to his stable and hung out with him for a bit, then people came up to me and said: "We've been trying to find you — you've won the grooms' prize!"

I am privileged to love my job and work with lovely horses. Sometimes when you're knee-deep in snow or it's raining you might rather be in the warm, but I couldn't see myself ever doing anything else. H&H

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