



'We have never fallen out — Blyth doesn't fall out with anyone'

Blyth Tait and Fiona Craig talk to **Carole Mortimer** about their largely unsung eight-year training partnership which produced an Olympic gold medal

FIONA ON BLYTH

BLYTH AND I first met around 1991 when I was over here competing. Although we both come from New Zealand, we hadn't met there and I had only ever heard of him.

I had had a fall and decided to concentrate on dressage, so I offered Blyth the ride on my event horse Private Benjamin. I don't remember how I became involved in training Blyth, but perhaps it was to do with the fact that Private Benjamin always led the dressage by miles.

The first horse I assisted Blyth with was the mare Delta, helping to prepare her for her first four-star event.

Delta, who was out of a rodeo mare, was quite difficult because she didn't have good natural paces. I am a believer in basic training and my aim then was to convince Blyth that if the basic training was correct, she would get better marks.

Although Blyth appreciated that my methods worked, that was not the only reason our system began to work, as we also like the same type of horse and our styles are not dissimilar.

Blyth is a jumping rider and had to learn to ride on the flat more correctly. I ride on the flat in a similar style in which he rides going into fences. I am not a dictating dressage type, and methods have to be clear and simple otherwise confusion in horse and rider occurs.

I ride Blyth's horses, mostly the advanced ones in preparation for a four-star or championship, and I travel with Blyth to the main events.

The best time for us had to be Atlanta. Ready Teddy was so unknown — I don't think he was meant to be there, as I'm sure he was originally reserve. He was only eight, had done nothing like it before and had only qualified at a small Italian event.

But it went right from the start. We were lucky to be drawn near the end of the two days of dressage as we needed as much time as possible with Ted because he'd never been in that sort of atmosphere before. We had to start working him on the grass miles away and gradually work him towards the arenas. If we had gone straight to the practice arena it would have blown his mind.

As Ted hates other horses coming anywhere

near him, it was also good that by the time the test came there was hardly anyone else working in. From then on it all went our way.

There are no particular tests that have been disappointing — the worst blow was Chesterfield dying before Sydney. That was such a deflating moment.

Of all Blyth's horses, I really enjoy riding Ted, although I love all Thoroughbreds — they're what I'm used to and mostly all we have in New Zealand.

Blyth's have all been a pleasure and not difficult. They are all class horses, after all, and, while they are all strong-minded and individual, there is nothing that can't be sorted.

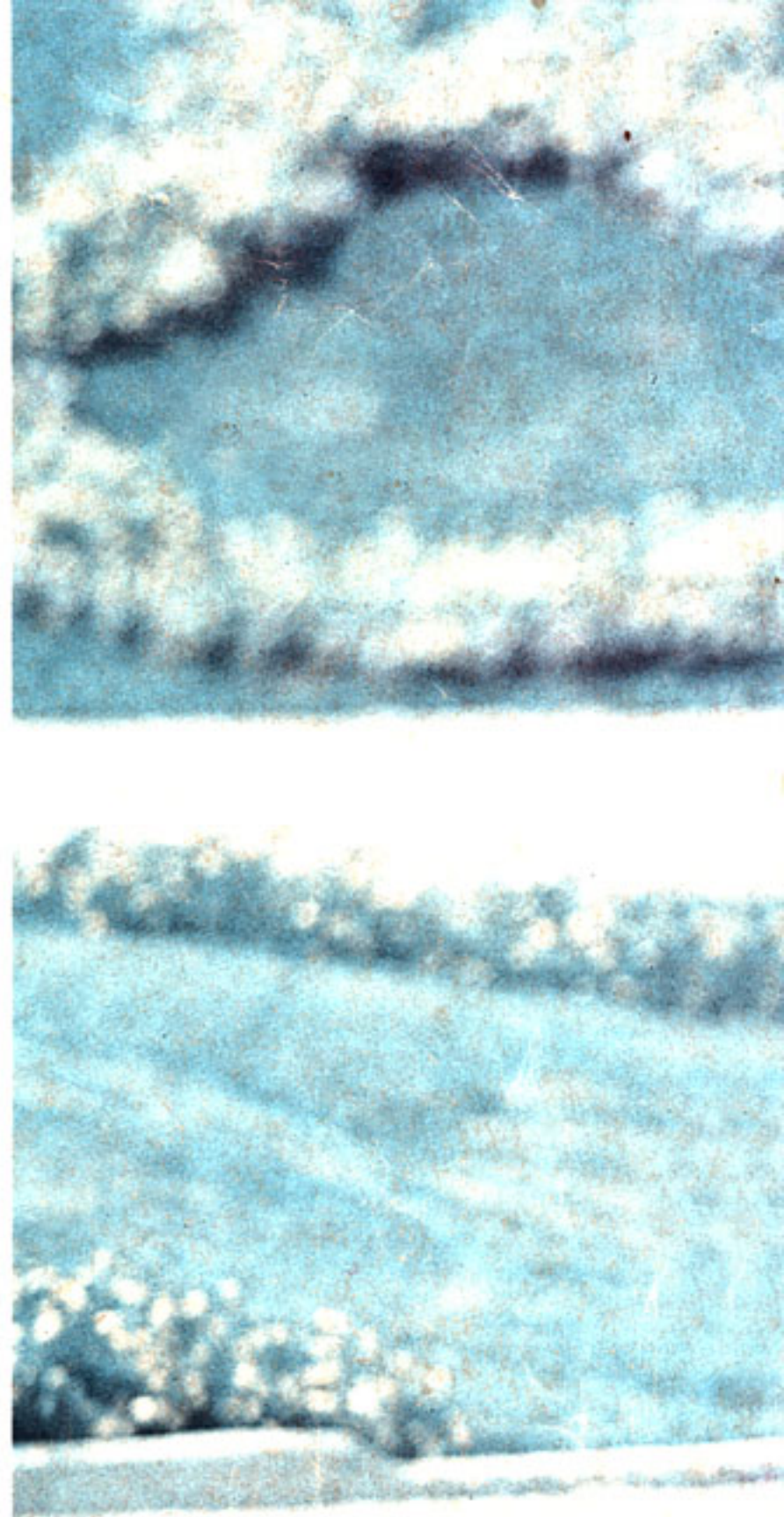
We have never fallen out. Blyth doesn't fall out with anyone. I have never seen him lose his temper and you can't fall out with someone who doesn't bite back. We throw ideas around and discuss things and if he doesn't agree he says so and his point is always valid.

In the warm-up arena there's tension and I guess he does get slightly stressed, although even that might be too big a word for it. And I want him to win as much as he does.

Fiona Craig is from Taupo, New Zealand, and came to England in 1987 to event and to further her ambition of riding at the Olympics in dressage. Her well known grand prix horse, Marcus, represented New Zealand, but her Olympics hopes were dashed when he went lame prior to Atlanta. Fiona now runs her own training yard in Ascot.

BLYTH ON FIONA

FIONA STARTED helping me during the build up to the WEG in 1994. My leading horse was Delta and she was the one I was struggling with on the flat. She was resistant and limited in her movement and had a difficult canter.



"It all went our way" — Blyth aboard the then-unknown Ready Teddy at the Atlanta Olympics, where the pair set themselves up for victory in the dressage arena.

Fiona made a huge difference. She stripped us back to basics and Delta came on in leaps and bounds. Her dressage improved by 15 marks and suddenly I could be sixth after that phase. By the time we got to the WEG her scores were in the late 40s as opposed to the 60s.

My one regret with Delta was that we didn't meet Fiona sooner, because it was only the dressage that let Delta down — she had been second at Badminton and Burghley by coming from behind and I am sure if we had met Fiona earlier she could have been a Badminton winner.

I have always struggled with flatwork — and I still say I struggle. Fiona has made it simple for me, which is what I like — some trainers can seem so scientific.

With an event horse it is important to keep continuity through the three phases. I want to ride forwards and light, which is the foundation I need for jumping. Fiona insists that the horses are sharp off the leg, which is what I want, and all she does on the flat enhances my jumping work. She has taught me to sit soft and light and is always correcting my position.

While I can be inconsistent on the flat, Fiona is consistent. She believes in the basics and she doesn't compromise. She might not be everybody's



cup of tea as she won't compromise her methods, but I understand where she is coming from.

We have some "strong" discussions, but Fiona is not a schoolteacher type — I am older than her for goodness' sake and I'm not a beginner! We don't try and dominate each other as we are both working towards the same goal.

I trust Fiona implicitly because she is so steeped in her theory of what will work. She is very clear and sees so well from the ground. She will ride the horses during most training sessions so that she can feel what is going on.

I have trained with other people because I like to pick up as much as I can — Mark Todd (now team trainer to the New Zealand team) will be helping me through the Worlds as well — but Fiona always works well with other trainers.

Fiona is not just there for the dressage — she is interested in the whole of the horse's career. She knows all my horses and is involved in their fitness regimes. She makes allowances for the other work an event horse has to do — she understands they have to gallop and jump as well as do dressage — which can be difficult unless the trainer has an understanding of the horse as a whole.

Fiona was instrumental in my Olympic gold medal. She started Ready Teddy with me when he

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was a six-year-old and, although his test in Atlanta was green, it wasn't bad for an eight-year-old. She has had a significant input into his development and success. He wouldn't have been the easiest horse and he wouldn't have become as good as he has if he hadn't been started in the right way.

Ted's test at Burghley last year, when he won, was memorable. I am sure we would have been five points down if Fiona hadn't been there. I went into the arena feeling confident. We lay second and a lot of that was due to the fact that Fiona had helped.

The most disappointing test was Ted's in Sydney. It was probably the only time he's let me

down and the only time I was disappointed. He hadn't had the preparatory runs and he reacted to the atmosphere — we just couldn't get to him and had been struggling with him all week.

In a competition situation I am fairly independent and do my own thing in the collecting ring. Although it is vitally important that she is there, Fiona wouldn't tell me what to do and while she'll watch and comment she doesn't try to boss me. I have been doing medium tests for 15 years and I know what I am doing. But I also know that what she says is for my own benefit.

When the test is over and I'm more relaxed, Fiona is the one I will try and thank first.

Blyth Tait, 41, comes from a racing and show jumping background in New Zealand's North Island. He sprang to prominence when finishing second at Badminton in 1990 on Messiah and then went on to win his first World title in Stockholm that year. Blyth won team silver and individual bronze on Messiah at the Barcelona Olympics and individual gold on Ready Teddy in Atlanta. With the same horse, he won the '98 World title and Burghley last year. He has been runner-up at Badminton three times and led the FEI rankings a record five times.