

# SHAPING UP TO BE NUMBER ONE

She almost became a fitness trainer and twice gave up show jumping, but now Australia's Edwina Alexander is one of the world's top show jumpers. Kerry Bowness finds out how she's achieved so much

On her first visit to Olympia in 2008, Edwina Alexander and Isovlas Itot Du Chateau won the World Cup qualifier with the sole double clear. The 15.2hh gelding and his 5ft 5in rider had denied a home win for John Whitaker. But this was no fluke victory for this diminutive partnership. A lifetime of hard work, determination and tough targets has made Edwina one of the world's best show jumpers.

Edwina, who was born in Sydney, New South Wales, wasn't part of an equestrian dynasty, in fact, her parents had no connection with horses at all. "I was one of those inner-city kids with an unexplained passion for horses," she says. "But we had some neighbours who kept horses, and I started riding for them when I was about eight years old." She joined the Avondale branch of the Pony Club soon afterwards and remained a member until the age of 14. "I only had a few ponies and moved on to horses quickly," she says. "I won a lot until I was about 18; then I had a period of riding poor horses. "I wanted to quit and my parents wanted me to

stick with it, so I didn't want to disappoint them. They then invested in some good horses for me." At this time, Edwina was studying for a degree in physical education. Sports and fitness have always been a major part of her life and after graduating at 21, she became a fitness instructor, a role she enjoyed for three years. In 1998, still unsure whether a career in equestrianism was for her or not, she decided to take a horse, Mr Dundee, to Europe. "If you want to make it in the horseworld, you have to be in Europe," she says. "In Australia, the sport is a bit dead-ended; over here you can find out if you are good enough."

## SETTLING IN EUROPE:

She returned home to Australia after six months, but briefly, and soon returned to Europe and quickly began working for Belgium's Ludo Phillipaerts riding his dealing horses. "I worked for Ludo for about three years before setting up on my own," she says. "However, I got a bit fed up running a business by myself." While working for herself, Edwina represented Australia at the 2002 World Equestrian Games (WEG) in Jerez with Quelle Damme Van Der Heffinck and in 2003 her career truly started to head in the right direction. That year she met her partner, former Olympic team gold

medallist Jan Tops, and began working for his yard, Stal Tops. But she wasn't fully involved with competing horses at top level. "For the first two years I worked more on the business side of things," she said. "It was something I enjoyed doing." In 2005 she was given the ride on Isovlas Pialotta, a horse whom she credits with changing her riding style and success. "People said Pialotta was not an easy ride — I felt I could ride her," says Edwina. "I'd been used to riding thoroughbred types and I had to change my style for her." The German mare had been ridden by Swedish Olympic silver medallist Rolf-Goran Bengtsson. "I had to be stronger with my seat and legs, think more about rhythm and be strong, but sensitive," says Edwina. "She was also very well schooled in dressage." Jan had owned Pialotta since she was a 10-year-old. She had been ridden by Rolf and then Tatiana Van Loringhoven. Edwina's fortune changed when Tatiana decided to stop riding. Jan asked her to try Pialotta, who was then 14, and the decision to do so changed her career. "I was fortunate to have her. Together with Stal Tops, she brought me to the level I'm at now. Without her, there's no way I'd be where I am today," she says. International success followed quickly and in 2005 Edwina won the five-star Grand Prix in Valkenswaard, then in 2006 Edwina and Pialotta were





▲ Edwina talks to Germany's Daniel Deusser, who is based at Stal Tops, in the indoor arena

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selected to represent Australia at the WEG in Aachen. The pair made the final of the individual championship and Edwina finished fourth. “She taught me a lot, but I take something from every horse I ride,” says Edwina. “They all have something to teach you and you should appreciate every one.” Edwina’s string began to grow in strength with the addition of international winners, such as Isovlas Socrates, who won the five-star grand prix in Zurich in 2008. Then on New Year’s Eve 2007, while in Australia, Jan surprised her. “He told me that he and my owner, Cees Van Opstal, had bought Itot Du Chateau from [France’s] Michel Hecart,” she says. “I’d never ridden him and I couldn’t wait to get back to the yard to try him.” Edwina wasn’t worried about taking the ride on a horse she hadn’t tried, particularly not this one. “I’d watched him compete a lot and there wasn’t much else he could do to convince me that I wanted him,” says Edwina. “Some people were worried he’d be too strong; others questioned his ability. He was bought with the Olympics in mind, and some suggested his height would restrict him, but for

me it wasn’t an issue. “Itot has a really big stride, the heart of a lion and lots of power. He also rides up in front, so you feel like you’re riding something much bigger,” she adds. Itot - or “Itzy Bitzy” as Edwina affectionately calls him - had been hugely successful for Michel and he didn’t disappoint Edwina. However, there was one goal in mind, so glory on the European circuit couldn’t be chased with full gusto. “We were targeting the Olympics,” explains Edwina. “I had set targets, but I wasn’t trying to win anything. All the shows I went to were a stage towards Olympic preparation.” The regime paid off and Edwina was selected to represent her country in Hong Kong, her Olympic debut. Despite what his critics had said, Itot proved them all wrong and he was the only horse to jump two clear rounds in the team competition. The Australian team finished ninth overall and Itot and Edwina were equal 10th in the individual final.

## LOOKING AHEAD:

After Hong Kong, in November, Itot partnered Edwina to a win in Brussels’

five-star grand prix before heading for the Olympia World Cup qualifier. Together with Late Night 16, the former ride of Germany's Heinrich-Hermann Engemann, Itot has secured his rider's qualification for this year's World Cup final in Las Vegas — Edwina is currently third in the Western European League. "I'm still undecided which horse I'll be taking to the final," she says. "Late Night has also proved to be very talented at top level, too. "Socrates has also returned after a break. This is of great benefit as the horses must help each other by rotating [workloads] in the sport." As she competes under the Australian flag, Edwina will not be able to contest the European Championships at Windsor in September. "It's a pity in some ways, but being based in Europe means I can concentrate on other competitions, while all my competitors are working towards Windsor," she says. The Global Champions Tour was set up by Jan and carries a huge prize-fund so success in the series is high

on the list of goals in 2009. But her real aim is to get to number one in the world rankings. "Last year, I was aiming to get into the top 10 on the rankings list by December, and I'd done it by September. Now, I'm aiming to get to number one, but I think that will take a bit longer," says Edwina. However, she isn't far off her goal, being ranked fifth at the moment. The support she gets from Stal Tops is key to her success. "My achievements are not just because of me," she says. "It's the result of the entire team of 30 staff working closely." Jan is a very successful businessman and trainer. He's been involved in the sales of some of the world's top horses, including Denis Lynch's Lantinus. Germany's Daniel Deusser is also based at the yard and Jan has been instrumental in the training of Rolf-Goran Bengtsson and top Swiss rider Steve Guerdat. "Jan is very motivating, and having someone like that is crucial at the top level. It doesn't matter that we are all competing for different countries,

we are working towards success for the yard," says Edwina, who has just secured a new sponsor in equestrian clothing company Kingsland. "And Jan's management programmes are key to keeping the horses in peak condition." Every horse at Stal Tops has an individual programme that includes flat and jumping work, specific nutrition, regular fitness checks, numbers of shows attended and targets." Keeping each horse very fit reduces the risk of injury, too," says Edwina. "As well as the ridden work they get in the school, we also have a treadmill, 2km track and a wood they can be walked through. Obviously, the younger horses don't get quite so much work." But Edwina's sheer determination to succeed and her passion to be the best in the sport has given other young riders hope that you can reach the top without having to be born in the saddle. "Everyone has dreams," she says. "There's still a lot more I want to do. "I've had to sacrifice a lot and it was very tough in the beginning. But if you believe in yourself and you are prepared to work for it, you can do anything." **H&H**



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◀ *Edwina with Late Night 16*

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