

Catriona McLeod has rarely known a day without horses. They were always present in her infant years while during her childhood they took on still greater significance. Now she's indisputably one of New Zealand's brightest Olympic hopes and she tends her horses and trains with them each day.

"At the age of four when my mother was out riding she'd carry me at the front of her saddle," Catriona recalls. It was a commanding position. But not for long, for soon she was able to ride and look after ponies. Even now she clearly remembers being bucked to the ground by an especially mischievous animal. But Catriona was undeterred and grew to know, and love, lots of ponies.

Before long she was caring for horses as well. From the start she learned to coax and treat them firmly. Experience taught her to understand each horse's changing moods and to respond without delay. "Horses are rather like children," she explains. "They perform best when you're firm, fair, and consistent. It's the rider's responsibility to avoid a clash of wills."

Time passed and Catriona enjoyed a busy, carefree, country childhood. The McLeods farm a property near Martinborough and they support their gifted daughter to the hilt. "Without that support I could not have made it this far," she says. "In this business practical support is vital. For eight or nine years I've had that from NRM. At the same time you need moral support; someone to pick you up when you're down, or pat you on the back when you do well. I have had the very best."

Catriona attended St Matthews' College for Girls in Masterton and by her mid teens was a two-time Pony of the Year winner. Her affinity for horses deepened and she learned to sum up their capabilities like a veteran. "You or I may excel in chess and be mediocre in athletics," she muses. "It's just the same with horses. One may perform best in dressage, another in jumping, and a third in long-distance running."

Catriona has her own views on riding accidents. "They happen to us all, but most of all to inexperienced riders. "A flighty horse is easily spooked if a rabbit dashes without warning across its path. Yet fear can be allayed by using the voice and a simple touch of the hand. A reassuring body movement may alone suffice; or a flick of the whip or spurs. "Once again it's essential that a rider is quick to reprimand and equally prompt in rewarding."

Catriona set goals and devoted all her energies to achieve them. As a consequence, she enjoyed great success in New Zealand junior showjumping and was a representative in the eventing team. Since then her target has changed. "Today my aim is to represent New Zealand - and win," she says. Commentators seem to agree she's well on her way.

Success has come her way with increasing regularity. Early in the 1990s as a diminutive, eye-catching newcomer, Catriona achieved her first senior placing

as New Zealand rep.

She demonstrated advanced eventing skills with a national team at the Wandin one day event in Melbourne riding Tinks Pottinger's Graphic. And on Graphic she won her highest accolade at the Taupo Three-Star three-day international. By then she was on a roll.

Catriona took the junior showjumping title on NRM Propaganda and was first in a World Cup round at Levin, this time on NRM Falcon, bred and owned jointly by Tony Vallance and McLeod herself. The passion for horses simultaneously led her to a practical, no-nonsense approach in tackling the necessary business side of a demanding career path. Visible joy in riding, and astute management knowhow, have proved complementary attributes on the road to success.

Now she'll need the entire inventory of skills, both in and out of the saddle, for in the present season Catriona has faced her greatest challenges and her toughest-ever schedule.

First of all she rode NRM Falcon in the World Cup showjumping final at Gothenburg, Sweden. Shortly after she appeared in the muddy three-day Badminton trials on NRM Win For Me and a week later rode NRM Oliver Twist at Puncteston, Wales.

This month she was at the Nations Showjumping Cup in Sweden. The event was crucial - it was the only show New Zealand could qualify in for the Sydney Olympics. Catriona and fellow New Zealander Bruce Goodin completed the event with eight faults each, good enough to qualify them for the Sydney Olympics. Their chances of going for gold now rest with the New Zealand selectors. Six New Zealanders can take part in eventing at Sydney but as yet there has been no decision on who'll be showjumping.

On a typical day at home on the Martinborough farm, Catriona is out feeding the horses by 7.30 am. She rides between 8am and 1pm and afternoons are spent indoors at her desk.

Deskwork means filling in applications and entries, keeping up with accounts, writing letters, juggling with flight times, buying tickets, ordering feed, consulting schedules. Catriona follows local and international news avidly and hates to miss one bulletin or another. On social occasions she'll gladly steer the conversation away from horses - except when there's a willing audience. "Contrast riding with many other sports and you find there's no age barrier," she insists. "Some people ride competitively at 25 and others in their 60s. In addition neither sex has an advantage over the other."

Catriona enjoys tennis and simply revels in water skiing. But she's unimpressed by the perception of riding as a sport for royals and wealthy playboys. Wairarapa has no place for such rarified attitudes. It simply produces skilful, easy riders ... and Catriona McLeod's up there, among the very best.

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