

Riders and horses team up in quest for medals

THE countdown to the London 2012 Olympics is well under way. It will be the first time the Olympics has been held in Britain since 1948 and will be watched by millions of people around the world. To mark the countdown to the start of the games, the Evening Telegraph is running a series of special reports every fortnight on the A to Z of Olympic sports. Janet Bew finds out more about the equestrian events.

THERE is something wonderful about watching horses and humans working in harmony, whether in a dressage test or over a show jumping course. The level of understanding and trust that will be displayed by the riders and horses competing at the London Olympics takes years and a lot of hard work to achieve. Rebecca White owns East Lodge Farm Riding and Pony Club in Ecton and she said: "With dressage and show jumping horses most of it is about breeding. They're like designer babies, a lot of research goes into looking at bloodlines to try and make sure you breed a top horse. "A good dressage horse will be intelligent and needs to be challenged and engaged all the time, it wouldn't make a good riding school horse." Their prime years are from the age of eight to 12 and they can cost upwards of £30,000 depending on how many points they have won in competitions. Trust between the horse and the rider is important – to get a horse to perform the complicated manoeuvres necessary to excel at dressage the horse has to want to please its rider. Rebecca said: "It is better if the same person rides and trains the horse throughout its life so they build up trust, but an amazing rider will be able to get a well-trained horse to perform." An elite dressage horse is like a top-class gymnast or ballerina, strong and supple. It will have powerful hindquarters and be a fluid mover. An elite show jumper, on the other hand, has been described by one top rider as having to be like "a nudist going over a barbed wire fence". A lot of horses can jump well but a good show jumper dislikes hitting

the fences. Rebecca said: "We have a mare here that flicks her back legs up as she goes over the jump, I've never seen her knock one down." Horses that are good at show jumping tend to be smaller and more compact than dressage horses and they, and their rider, have to be brave. Rebecca said: "The two disciplines are like Mars and Venus, dressage is calm, collected and elegant, whereas show jumping is more about speed, which might be why women tend to prefer dressage and men show jumping." The rider's body language plays an important part in how any horse performs, said Rebecca. She added: "Riding requires patience, a good posture and confidence. Horses can sense if a rider is tense or nervous. You have to be sensitive to the horse and to yourself, it can be a case of 30 steps forward and 40 back. "You can spot who will make a good rider pretty much as soon as they have the first lesson but as with anything, to reach the top you have to put the time and effort in." Every dressage test is different and the rider will have to memorise it to make sure they do the correct moves at the right time. Show jumping competitors will walk the course beforehand, counting the strides between each fence to make sure the horse approaches it correctly. As Rebecca said: "In the end who wins the medals next year will depend a little bit on who is lucky on the day, but we have some good riders." ■ For details of East Lodge Farm Riding and Pony Club go to www.eastlodgeRIDINGSCHOOL.CO.UK

THE BASICS

In modern Dressage competitions, the horse and rider perform a series of movements known as a Dressage test. The tests are performed in a 60m x 20m arena before a panel of seven judges, who award scores for individual movements and for the overall routine.

The Dressage competition consists of a Team event, which includes the Grand Prix and Grand Prix Special rounds, and an Individual event, which includes the Grand Prix, the Grand Prix Special and the Grand Prix Freestyle. The Team and Individual events are conducted simultaneously: a rider's score in a test may be counted in both events. In the Grand Prix and the Grand Prix Special, all riders and horses perform the same tests. After the Grand Prix Special, medals are awarded in the Team event. However, the Individual event continues: the 18 riders with the best scores in the Grand Prix Special then qualify for the Grand Prix Freestyle, for which riders

perform their own freestyle routines set to music. The scores in this round decide the winners of the Individual competition.

The Jumping competition is a tense, exciting test of skill, speed and power. Held in an arena around a short course containing 12-14 fences, the event requires huge reserves of boldness, accuracy and nerves of steel – from both the riders and their horses. As with all three Equestrian disciplines on the Olympic programme, the competition features both Individual and Team events, and men and women compete against each other on equal terms. There are a total of five rounds in the Jumping competition. Two of these rounds are used to determine the placings in the Team event, with all five rounds playing a part in the Individual event. If two or more rider/horse combinations are tied for medal places after the fifth and final round of the Individual event, there will be a jump-off to break the tie.

Jargon Buster

Canter: A steady controlled gait for which three of the horse's legs are off the ground at once.

Full-pass: When a horse moves sideways, bent in the direction of movement.

Half-pass: When a horse moves forwards and sideways at the

same time, bent in the direction of movement.

Piaffe: A trotting movement, performed almost on the spot.

Self-carriage: When a horse moves in balance without support from the reins.

DID YOU KNOW ?

At the Olympic Games horses must be at least eight-years-old for Dressage and Eventing, and nine-years-old for Jumping.



TAKE THE
**OLYMPIC
CHALLENGE**

with the
Telegraph

