

Skijoring champion

Susan Oakes on breaking records and tractor training



I say I was born on a horse.

My mother and father hunted every week and were involved in racehorses. By the age of four, I was riding side-saddle on our donkey, Rosie. I found my grand-aunt's side-saddle in the tack room and I was fascinated by it. From then on I rode everything side-saddle, including our showing Connemaras, and hunted side-saddle aged eight.

I organised the world record number of ladies to hunt side-saddle, with the Meath Foxhounds and the Tara Harriers. The first year we had 15, the second year we had 50, and the third year we had 62 from all over the world.

I hold another world record.

In 2011, I saw a picture of Esther Stace jumping 6ft 6in side-saddle in Australia in 1915. It was captioned, "Are you brave enough?" I took it as a personal challenge. I told the media I'd do it in eight weeks. I thought, "How hard can it be?"

It took me two and a half years. Esther Stace's family contacted me to say she'd actually cantered up a ramp to the bar and it was just that drop that was 6ft 6in, but by then I was too heavily invested in it. So I set the record for side-saddle puissance at 6ft 8in.

Looking back, it was mad to think I'd do it in eight weeks.

I had no showjumping horse or trainer. I work in the dental industry, but trained five days a week and went through about 25 horses trying to find the right one. In the end, I had two amazing horses I used – one over a triple bar and one the wall – and two more in the lorry that could also have done it.

The record-breaker, SIEC Atlas, had jumped in the World Games. He was a good 1.60m horse who'd lost his way. I hunted him, too, and always say he was the only horse who schooled round the World Games to hunt with the Meath. My second horse was SIEC Oberon. He cleared 6ft 5in over the triple bar. On 24 October 2013, both dug so deep for me, they threw their hearts over first, their bodies second. It was incredible.

Side-saddle jumping is very different to astride. The horse's take-off strike is different, so

the perfect spot astride is not the same as for side-saddle. I needed to be more forward as they have to come up half a stride before they normally would to give me enough room to allow the horse to bascule. A hunting stride and an ability to go on whatever stride you're given comes in handy.

The craziest thing I've ever done on a horse came about via my side-saddle exploits. I was invited to ride in the side-saddle race in the Calgary Stampede, after which I arranged for the organiser to come hunting in Ireland – I'm honorary master of the Fingal Harriers. In the bar afterwards, she told me she was organising a skijoring competition (in which a rider tows a skier) and

race venue in Canada. When those quarter horses take off, the power of the pull is immense. You have to be so strong in your arms, legs and core.

The biggest race is the 2½-furlong sprint, which attracts all the top skiers and cowboys. I've done lots of crazy things, but I'd never been so nervous. When the flag dropped, I nearly fell off with the power of the pull.

I lost my right stirrup, my boot fell off and then my hat, too. But we won.

"I lost my right stirrup, my boot fell off and then my hat, too"

suggested that my friend Barry O'Brien Lynch, who's a good skier, and I make up an Irish team.

I told Barry we had to practise, but there's never any snow in Ireland. He had an old Massey Ferguson and we put a roll of carpet on a hill, put him on a sleigh and I'd drive the tractor to practise the pull. Then we had two days of practice at the

No one could believe this Irish pair had trained with a roll of carpet and a kid's sleigh, but they'd given us such a good horse.

I couldn't pick a favourite horse. Each one has taught me a different lesson, enabled me to achieve different things and contributed something to make me who I am. **H&H**
● As told to Martha Terry

Picture by Amanda Bell



NEXT
WEEK

Philip Judge,
showing steward