

Devoted *to* dressage

Young dressage rider Olivia Oakeley tells Nicky Moffatt how hard work and dedication have helped her become an international contender

Olivia hopes to go all the way with her dressage career

If it wasn't for her parents treating her to a 'pony party' on her sixth birthday, 21-year-old dressage rider Olivia Oakeley may never have ridden in her first Grand Prix a few weeks ago.

One visit to a riding school was enough to get the little girl hooked on ponies and nothing could keep her away from them after that.

"I would be at the stables whatever the weather," Olivia recalls. "Sometimes, when it was howling a gale, I was the only one who turned up for the group lesson and I ended up having a private session instead!"

Aged eight, Olivia woke up on Christmas morning to find a little chestnut model pony wrapped up neatly inside a shoebox. It transpired that her parents had taken a pony on loan for her from the riding school – Sharny, a little chestnut mare.

"Sharny was a feisty little thing," recalls the rider. "But I was committed and it showed my parents how keen I was."

A year later, Olivia's mum and dad bought her Sunny, her first pony.

"Sunny taught me how to stay on as he had a dirty stop over a fence," Olivia says of the 13.2hh dun gelding. "He would go to take off and then decide he didn't want to jump after all!"

"As I was keen on jumping at the time, my instructor suggested it might be better for my parents to sell Sunny and buy me another pony. That's how The Real Slim Shady (Jack), a 13.2hh grade C showjumper, came into my life."

Olivia soon got to grips with Jack and the pair concentrated on showjumping and cross-country, with much success, before the pony sadly developed kissing spines and needed to have a year off work. ▶

Olivia and Donna Summer competing in their first Grand Prix test



Photography: Jon Stroud. For more information about Olivia, visit: www.oliviaoakeley.co.uk.

Olivia's horses

DONNA SUMMER (Rio)
Vital statistics: A 14-year-old, 15.3hh Grand Prix level gelding by Dimaggio, who's owned by Katie and Olivia Oakeley. **Olivia says:** "It has been so rewarding to produce Rio from scratch. I've owned him since he was five and at that time he could only just manage a 20m circle in canter. Rio has a huge personality and sulks if I don't give him enough attention."



DON CARISSIMO (Darcy)
Vital statistics: A 10-year-old, 16.2hh gelding by Don Crusador, owned by Anne and Steve Keen. **Olivia says:** "Darcy is gorgeous to look at and he knows it. I haven't had the ride on him for long, but we're getting to know each other slowly."



ECLIPS
Vital statistics: A six-year-old, 16.2hh gelding by San Remo, owned by Desi Dillingham and Olivia. **Olivia says:** "I am so excited about this horse's future as he's showing great promise already. He did his first Novice test last year and scored over 71 per cent!"



LORDSWOOD GENTLY (Gently)
Vital statistics: A five-year-old, 16.2hh gelding who's owned by Mel Worgan and Lucy Fawcett. **Olivia says:** "I am so grateful to Mel and Lucy for giving me the ride on this horse – he's super and is going to be so special. Gently had five months off after being backed, to allow him time to grow up, and came back into work earlier this year."



"In the meantime, I rode ponies for other people," says Olivia. "An instructor at Pony Club told my parents I had natural ability and he thought I'd be good at dressage. "When Jack came back into work, it was clear he wasn't going to jump again so I had a go at dressage and did well. I'm competitive and our dressage success made me follow that path instead." Olivia's next horse was a dressage pony called May Frizzante (Frizzy), a "tricky but awesome pony", who was competing at Medium level when the rider took her on. "We did OK nationally and even got invited to go to a friendly international," Olivia remembers. "I was 12 years old and it was a great experience – when I was given my red jacket embroidered with Great Britain, I was bursting with excitement." While nerves kicked in at the international competition, resulting in Olivia forgetting her test three times, she was determined to learn more about this discipline, so together with her parents, they set about doing just that.

A risky business

Olivia's mum rang renowned dressage trainer Ian Woodhead, who was on the panel of team selectors at that time. She asked his advice on what to do for the best for her young daughter and was given two options. "While Frizzy was amazing, she was not a European-level pony," Olivia explains. "Ian told mum we could either buy a pony who was already at this level, which would cost a fortune, or buy a young horse.

"We're not a rich family, so buying a ready-made pony was out of the question. "Instead, we started looking for a young horse with help from Char Lassetter, who was my trainer back then." They came across an advert for a beautiful horse called Donna Summer (Rio), a five-year-old just-backed chestnut gelding by Dimaggio.

"Rio had already been advertised for more than we could afford, but was later re-advertised for less, so we went to take a look," Olivia reveals. "I didn't like him at first as he was unbalanced, especially in canter. However, I rode him out of the yard and a lorry went past, which made him piaffe on the spot. I enjoyed the feeling it gave me and that's when I fell in love."



Don Carissimo is a relatively new ride for Olivia



With support from great owners, the future is looking bright for Olivia

Olivia's parents decided to take a chance and buy their relatively inexperienced daughter Rio. "I'd taken a bit of confidence knock," Olivia recalls. "One of the selectors told mum if I was put on anything decent, I wouldn't be able to ride it. "While it shook me, it also made me more determined. I guess my stubborn side came out – tell me I can't do something and I will." Olivia admits there were many occasions when she wondered what she had done. "I was a fat little blob on a talented horse and a lot of outsiders were telling my parents they were mad for buying me Rio," she states. "It could have gone horribly wrong, but I worked hard to make sure it didn't." Getting to know Rio took Olivia a lot of time, but through the international dressage squad, the rider started training with top rider and trainer Gareth Hughes, who she describes as a "tremendous help". "I only managed to get to Gareth once every six weeks," Olivia explains. "The rest of the time it was just Rio and I learning together."

Chance of a lifetime

One day, Olivia was fortunate enough to get a place on a clinic with her idol, Olympic dressage star Carl Hester. "Afterwards, I spoke to Carl about going to his yard for some training when I had finished my GCSEs and he said yes. "I literally finished my last GCSE and went to the prom, and the next day was on my way to Carl's, along with Rio, to cover for a working pupil who was on holiday for two weeks. "After a week, Carl asked me to stay for three weeks and by the third week, I wasn't leaving. I ended up staying there for 18 months as a working pupil. "On my first day, I hacked out Valegro. I was riding around the block thinking: 'Wow, I'm on Valegro'. I had to ring mum as soon as I got back to tell her my exciting news. "The opportunities at Carl's were amazing. The working pupils warmed-up the top horses for Carl and Charlotte [Dujardin] and I received four lessons a week from Carl, which was invaluable.

"Riding around the block I was thinking: 'Wow, I'm on Valegro'. I had to ring mum when I got back to tell her the news"

5 things Olivia couldn't live without

- 1 Neue Schule bits:** "The company is so helpful in choosing the right bits for my horses. I love the designs and the horses work softly and happily in all the bits I ride in."
- 2 Charles Owen Ayr8 hat:** "I scored my personal best wearing this hat last year and finished fifth in Europe in my final season in under 21s. For those reasons, it's very special to me."
- 3 Golden pearl stock pin:** "My great grandmother left me a gorgeous stock pin in her will. It's about 100 years old and I don't feel happy in a competition unless I am wearing it in the arena."
- 4 My car:** "I love my Vauxhall Corsa and couldn't be without it, due to the amount of driving I have to do. I've only had it seven months and have already clocked up over 20,000 miles! My parents bought me a personalised number plate for my 21st birthday."
- 5 My diary:** "With the amount of lessons I do, my diary has to come everywhere with me as people often call to book when I am away from home."



"It was my first year in juniors with Rio and I learned so much from all the team there." While Olivia was working at Carl's, she also worked four nights a week in a nightclub to earn some money. "I was getting two hours sleep on those nights and ended up developing tonsillitis and glandular fever," she remembers. "It was a huge life lesson, as I thought my body would cope, but it didn't. Even now, my immune system isn't great."

Back to school

After leaving Carl's, Olivia went to Hartpurpury College in Gloucestershire to study for A-levels. "I loved my time at Hartpurpury and I was able to



The rider drives to different yards each day to work her horses

“Everyone is so supportive. My owners are great and my family have sacrificed so much – we haven’t had a family holiday for nine years”

teach some local riders and start to build up a client base,” says Olivia.

“From Hartpury, I went to work for Sandy Phillips, who was also in Gloucestershire. I thought I could ride well until I went there!”

“She was tough on me, but I can take that. I would rather be told if something isn’t up to standard and when Sandy said something was good, you knew it was.”

When Sandy moved away, Olivia wanted to stay in the county, so she made the decision to go out on her own and build up her teaching.

“It was hard at first, but it was the best decision of my life,” she states. “My client base is building all the time and I’ve had great support from people organising clinics for me. I travel from

Wales to Newquay to Cheshire regularly and teach up to 15 lessons a day!

In between teaching, Olivia rides her two advanced horses, Rio and Don Carissimo (Darcy), who belongs to Steve and Anne Keen.

She also rides for Lordwood Dressage, near Badminton, where she soon plans to be based.

“Everyone is so supportive,” says the rider. “My owners are great and my parents have sacrificed so much for me – we haven’t been on a family holiday for nine years!”

A Grand Prix debut

Back in January, Olivia headed off to Addington Manor Equestrian Centre in Buckinghamshire with Rio and Darcy, where she started the show in great style by finishing second in the Advanced Medium with Darcy and second in the Intermediate II with Rio.

“I rang Carl to tell him our news and he told me to get on and ride Rio in the Grand Prix,” Olivia smiles. “I hadn’t entered, so I asked the organisers if they could slot us in and amazingly, they’d had a withdrawal.

“As I rode over to the warm-up area, I looked at the scoreboard and was shocked to see no one had gained more than 60 per cent.

“However, Rio strutted his stuff and despite a few tense moments, we gained 65.6 per cent and finished fourth!”

“I owe so much to Rio. As well as having produced him myself, he’s the horse who put me on the international map.

“Rio and I have competed on the Junior and then Young Rider European teams together every year since 2010, and last year I achieved three personal best scores, finishing with over 70 per cent!”



Going it alone is the best decision Olivia ever made

5 things you didn't know about Olivia

- 1 Olivia achieved seven As and two Bs in her GCSEs.
- 2 In her first ever dressage test, Olivia’s pony went down the centre line before swiftly reversing all the way back out again! Olivia received a special rosette for her efforts.
- 3 Aged 11, while riding at the young horse championships, her idol Carl Hester signed her numnah.
- 4 Olivia’s father used to hate horses, but now mucks out and tacks up.
- 5 The rider is completely fearless and doesn’t ever suffer with competition nerves.

Healthy lifestyle

After her illness at Carl’s, Olivia takes her health more seriously these days.

“I go to the gym four days a week and try to eat as well as can,” she says.

“At the gym, I work with my strength and conditioning coach Joe Rymell, who has made a massive difference to my riding.

“Since 2010, I have been selected for the World Class programme, where I have access to top trainers and other experts.

“The programme’s performance psychologist Kate Goodger is an amazing person and she has helped me so much.

“Kate uses the chimp theory, which works on the principle that your brain is made up of three parts – chimp, computer and human.

“The chimp is the irrational thinking mode and the idea is to learn to manage your chimp so the rational computer and human parts of the brain take over.

“Three years ago, when warming up for a test, I’d worry about disappointing anyone if I didn’t do well, whereas now I focus on my performance and can forget about everyone else.”

Like most top riders, Olivia wants to eventually win Olympic medals and achieve world titles.

“My great grandfather was a world champion wrestler and my grandfather was an Olympic sailor, so it would be nice to follow in their footsteps,” she states. “However, I would love to be like Carl and help other riders get there, too.

“I want to be a rider who inspires people, with a good string of horses and hopefully a few medals along the way.

“My younger brother, Will, has already told me that when I find a horse like Valegro I have to sell it for megabucks and buy him a Ferrari!

“I’m not sure I can promise that, but I do promise I will devote every ounce of effort I have to achieve my dreams.” ■