

Join the crew

Teamwork makes the dream work for these dedicated unsung heroes of the showjumping world, discovers *Catherine Welton*

WHETHER you have a keen eye for a floral arrangement, the strength and agility to rebuild a fence faster than a Formula One pitstop or the calm authority to keep an unruly collecting ring in check – there's a role within the showjumping arena crew for you.

"Primarily the role of showjumping crew is assisting the course-designers all day, moving jumps, helping measure distances and renumbering the course," explains Wiktoria Wietronek, who has worked at the Scottish National Equestrian Centre since 2022.

"You are also responsible for letting the competitors in and out of the arena, as well as picking up any poles they may have knocked down, quickly and efficiently before the next competitor so you can get out of their way. And poo picking to keep the arena as tidy as possible."

Wiktoria works in the warm-up and the main ring but there's no doubting her favourite place to be. "I love the main ring action. I do also love the busy environment of the warm-up, seeing how people warm their horses up, and the bond between the riders, horses and grooms. But it can be a stressful place."

Beccy Miller started volunteering at the London International with her mother, Karen, a couple of years ago, and was immediately drawn to the team of people who were dressing the arena.

"I met the flower team and I was invited to join them for Royal Windsor in 2024. I've never looked back," says Beccy. "We're in charge of all the flowers in the main arena, which includes dressing all the jumps, designing islands and dressing any sponsors' decorations."

"We have to fix any flowers that get knocked over, which is especially difficult at outdoor shows like Windsor where you have wind and rain to contend with."

Karen admits to feeling nervous the first time she joined an arena crew. "It was about four years ago at the London International Horse Show at Excel. We arrived on the first morning, wondering what we had committed ourselves to, but once we met the other volunteers for training, everyone was so friendly."

Wiktoria remembers feeling similarly reassured by the other volunteers.

"I was handed a clipboard and put on the start gate. I was terrified but the rest of the team jumped straight in, showing me the ropes and pointing me in the right direction. Looking back, getting stuck in like that was probably the best thing to do, although I may not have thought that at the time."

NICK FINNEY volunteers at the Global Champions Tour among other events. He agrees that getting stuck in is important: "You need to be prepared to muck in. Especially at the larger events, you need to be outgoing as you'll be interacting with the public and the competitors."

Nick is often allocated the horse crossings to marshal and says safety is paramount.

"You have to remember that the horses can get spooked at the slightest thing," he says. "You have to make sure you give clear instructions to the riders and the general public, so they know exactly what's required of them. You're trying to keep horses away from humans, especially at the crossing, you don't want the two to meet."

Illustration by Sophie Cheeseman

ARENA

Ensuring the spectators have a great day out is a big part of the appeal for Nick, but he also warns that a public-facing role means being on best behaviour. "Remember, you're an ambassador in some respects, so smile and be polite," he says. "If you're glum and rude it's not going to go down very well, especially in these days of social media."

As we are all aware, show days can be long and stamina is another prerequisite.

"You need to be hard-working, especially if you're doing the fences, lifting and carrying poles and wings. You do work long hours and I definitely need a lot of coffee to get through the week," says Wiktoria.

She also points out that arena crew need to keep their wits about them. "A showjumping arena can be a really busy place, so it's very important to have situational awareness."

Beccy agrees: "The most important thing is not to get in the way of horses or vehicles. The ponies can be a bit more unpredictable so you need to have eyes in the back of your head. We're in the arena when the tractors are harrowing the surface and you don't want to get in the way of that."

A busy showjumping schedule, with multiple classes, can be hard to keep up with, so Wiktoria says if you're in any doubt about what's happening, it's best to check.

"If you're unsure, ask. No one is here to judge you," she says. "There is nothing worse than feeling you might be doing something incorrectly, especially during a course change. Never assume you know what's going on because the chances are you don't!"

And that's even before something unexpected happens: "The power going off during the show last year at the Excel made for an interesting time," Karen recalls.

"Thankfully they have a back-up there and normal service resumed quickly."

FOR all of the hard work involved, there's a lot to gain from the experience of arena-crewing.

"You learn a lot from doing it," says Wiktoria, "from learning about how the show runs on a day-to-day

basis, to understanding how to build courses. Watching other riders helps you to improve your own riding, understanding for example why the pole fell, or why the horse stopped at a fence – was it because of the approach or another reason."

For Nick, it's an opportunity to leave the day job behind and indulge his passion for equestrianism. "You're able to switch off from everyday life and immerse yourself in the event," he says. "It's a way of switching off from the stresses of life."

He points out that it might be hard work but it's also a ringside seat for the action, without the cost of the ticket.

Karen agrees: "When you're down by the arena gates, you can't fail to be amazed by what they're jumping."

Her daughter, Beccy, adds: "The best bit is undoubtedly getting up close to the action. You get to see a lot of different courses and meet the course-builders. And watch some of the best riders in the world."

"I'm not sure I could narrow down the most impressive round I've seen, but it's hard to beat

"The best bit is getting up close to the action; watching some of the best riders"

BECCY MILLER

watching Guy Williams winning the puissance at LIHS on Mr Blue Sky UK."

But any feelings of being starstruck quickly pass, according to Wiktoria. "I've had the opportunity to see a few famous riders while I've been crewing. It's easy to get worked up and have this 'oh but they're famous' bubble, but the truth is if you treat them like any other competitor, they're sweet and normal people!"

And it seems the arena crew bug is a hard one to shake. "As a family, this year will be our 40th consecutive London International," says Karen. "Without volunteers, events like this wouldn't take place." **H&H**

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