



Left: "I probably had better horses when I started jumping than I do now, apart from Valmy De La Lande!" – Jack Whitaker, here aboard Valmy, knows well how his family has helped him



Riders born into successful equestrian families look to have a head start. But is it always an advantage to have such a legacy? *Catherine Welton* explores what it's like to grow up as a member of "equestrian royalty"

JACK WHITAKER first started to get an inkling that he came from a famous equestrian family when he was about nine years old.

"We used to go to London Olympia and Dad [Michael] and John used to get a big cheer when they went in the ring," he recalls. "You couldn't get anywhere because of people taking their photo."

Seeing his family's success made Jack want to pursue a career in showjumping.

"You see Dad and the rest of the family winning week in and week out, then, when you get that first taste of winning, you want to replicate that feeling," he says.

Pictures by Elli Birch/Boots and Hooves, Peter Nixon and Bex Pattenden

Born in the saddle



Left: Jack Whitaker, with his father Michael and William Funnell, has been steeped in showjumping from birth. Below: with his father, uncle John and cousin Robert at Royal Windsor

Isabelle Cook was also inspired by one of her parents, eventing legend Tina.

"I remember going to all the big events at a young age, the Badminton and Burghleys, unaware really of what was happening," Isabelle says. "But when I went to the London Olympics in 2012, I suddenly realised Mum was quite famous! I felt the success and I just wanted to do that and nothing else. Growing up with it, I'd never known any different."

IT'S a story with which Leonie Lightfoot, performance coach with British Equestrian, is very familiar. "If you've been brought up in an equestrian family, it's part of your identity," she says. "If a family is involved in equestrian sport, it's highly likely a child gets the message that being involved in equestrian sport is fun, important and valued by this family."

Leonie points out that there are many practical benefits of coming from an equestrian family.



"My dad doesn't say a lot but what he does say is unbelievable... an endless supply of advice"

JACK WHITAKER

"Whether it's being able to borrow a lorry or having horses at home to ride, there are fewer barriers if you're

in a horsey family already," she says.

For Jack, one of the biggest advantages he experience was access to top-class horses at an early age.

"I probably had better horses when I started jumping than I do now, apart from Valmy De La Lande!" he muses. "I had one hand-me-down from my dad that had jumped five-star grands prix."

Isabelle also benefitted from equine "hand-me-downs".

"I was lucky to have horses that Mum had ridden and would pass down, either older ones or younger ones that weren't going to make top horses but were good enough for me," she says.

International dressage rider Gareth Hughes, whose 17-year-old daughter Ruby is following in his footsteps, cautions that there's a flip side to these practical benefits. Success is sometimes attributed to the family's set-up rather than to the rider's talent and hard work.

"People assume that we spend millions of pounds on horses and that's why Ruby does well," he says.

"So far, we've bought one horse for her, a youngster, and she had to put some money in. Everything else we've loaned. People don't see that, they assume that because we ride at the level we do, these horses are led out of the stable for her and she gets to tootle down the centre line."

AS well as having facilities, equestrian families are a treasure trove of knowledge, which Leonie says can be a huge advantage.

"If you think about the different areas you'd need advice in – from vet issues to navigating the structure

Laura's choice

I find it fascinating all those family dynasties that there are in equestrian sport. I never had that, so I thought it would be interesting to delve into that different side of growing up and to see what they think the pros and cons are. From the outside, we might assume they have a massive advantage on the rest of us but is that the reality?



Three generations: Althea Gifford with Tina (on Jim Chromiak's Cymoon "F" Z) and Isabelle Cook



“I want to do it my way but 99% of the time she’s right!”

ISABELLE COOK ON BENEFITTING FROM HER MOTHER TINA’S EXPERIENCE



of competitions – it could be really helpful to have someone living with you who has progressed through the levels and knows the answers,” she points out.

Tina Cook, who grew up with successful equestrian parents herself, couldn’t agree more. Her father Josh Gifford was a four-time champion jump jockey as well as Grand National-winning trainer; her mother Althea was a top-class international showjumper.

“I loved following Dad around the yard,” Tina says. “I had 60 horses at my back door and I would watch him look around every horse every single evening. I learnt a lot from him and his attention to detail.”

Now Isabelle is benefitting from that knowledge, too, although that’s not to say she always takes Tina’s advice.

“At the end of the day, she’s my mum so you’re always going to disagree on something!” Isabelle says. “She’ll suggest something, and I want to do it my way but 99% of the time she’s right and I think I should have listened to her in the first place.”

Jack agrees. “That’s the only disadvantage,” he jokes, of his father’s expertise. “Michael knows everything. So you have your own idea, he says it won’t work, you try it anyway and then it doesn’t work. He’s always right.”

Overall, Jack sees his family’s knowledge as a huge advantage. “My dad doesn’t say a lot but what he does say is unbelievable. It’s an endless supply of advice.”

Above and right: “I loved following Dad around the yard... I learnt a lot from him” – Tina Cook is now sharing her equestrian experience – and enjoyment – with her daughter Isabelle. Below: Rebecca and Gareth Hughes have, among other support, talked to daughter Ruby about the highs and lows of the sport, helping to prepare her



Gareth is particularly keen to pass on what he's learnt about the business of dressage to daughter Ruby.

"We had to build our businesses from scratch and Ruby gets to swing off the back of that," he says. "But we don't earn a living through competing, the prize money is too small. So, what you also have to learn at some point is that it's about creating a business. Ruby has learnt that our business is about producing horses."

Gareth has also used his experience to prepare Ruby for the sport's inevitable lows.

"One of the hardest things is that you can be top of your game one day and the next day your horse goes lame or you lose the ride," he says. "You have to be really emotionally strong to deal with all of that. Ruby has seen it with us, and we talk to

her about it. What makes you have more chance of being successful is being able to deal with failure."

Tina remembers her parents instilling this resilience in her.

"They taught me that you will have injuries, you will have disappointments and you enjoy the highs when they come around," she says.

In turn, watching Tina has helped Isabelle become more resilient, too.

"I've seen it through her, her falling off and getting injured," she says. "It makes you realise what can happen and how you bring yourself back from that."

Having a parent who understands because they've been there themselves can be a huge support.

"When I come out of the ring and it's not gone right, Dad doesn't have to say anything because he knows how I feel," Jack says. "He's not telling me everything I did wrong, he understands that I know and doesn't make a big thing out of it."

FOR all the advantages, following in a successful parent's footsteps can put extra pressure on a rider. Leonie says it's important to recognise that you will be compared, and to know how you're going to deal with that.

"You need a strong skill set to manage the inevitable comparison," she says. "I advise riders to bring it back to themselves and how they want to do it. Some say it really fires them up and motivates them – everyone is an individual. As long as it doesn't lead to beating yourself up."

Tina admits she struggled with this at first. "Mum was a natural and I had to work at it, which I found frustrating at times," she says. "I wanted to do better. If I wanted to succeed I had to work out what worked for me."

Jack also remembers feeling the pressure early on.

"When you start coming off ponies and onto horses you feel the pressure of the Whitaker name a bit more," he says. "But in this sport, you put more pressure on yourself than anyone else can put on you."

When Ruby was younger, Gareth was conscious of the expectations put on her.

"All I wanted was for her to come out of the arena happy and enjoy her ponies and competing," he says. "As she gets older it gets a bit easier because I feel she can cope with it."

Ultimately, Gareth believes Ruby's success is her own.

"She is a lucky girl to have this to start her off," he acknowledges. "But luck doesn't keep you there."

Jack agrees. "I'm in the position of being very privileged. But I still have to work really hard to take hold of the chance and not mess it up. The Whitaker name isn't going to make you jump clear rounds. You have to do it yourself." **H&H**



Baby Ruby with Gareth Hughes – once she was riding, "all I wanted was for her to come out of the arena happy and enjoy her ponies", says her father

The alternative view

TREBLE CCI5* victor Jonelle Price was born into a non-horsey family but thinks it's been an advantage for her.

"Coming from a non-horsey background, I had to fight for it a bit harder," she says. "You're born with the passion, but you really have to pursue it to make it happen."

Without equestrian knowledge in the family, Jonelle looked elsewhere for advice. "There's always a role model, it doesn't have to be your parents," she says. "It might be the senior kid at Pony Club who's jumping bigger than you. Or someone in the region who's doing well."

And having parents who weren't experienced equestrians had its upsides.

"Ignorance can be bliss," she says. "My family knew nothing, they weren't aware of the dangers. If I had to watch my child, it would be terrible – I know too much!"

Ultimately, Jonelle believes it's resilience that gets you to the top in horse sport.

"If you don't have that ability to take the knocks and the injuries, it doesn't matter whether you come from an equestrian background or not."

But when it comes to her own children, Jonelle worries about the pressure the Price name would bring with it.

"I genuinely hope that neither of my children want to ride because when you have two high-profile parents in the sport, you are always going to be compared to them," she says.