

# the man behind the medals

When Parkmore Ed rose to fame as just one of the horses within the strong British equestrian team at the Beijing Olympics last summer, it was likely to be his rider, William Fox-Pitt, who was accredited with his success, and rightly so. But if it hadn't been for Newent-based Andrea Verdina it is just possible that Parkmore Ed would never have reached these dizzying heights of fame, says

**Charlotte Goodworth...**

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**I**n many living rooms around the country last summer, people were glued to their televisions cheering on Team GB as they valiantly held their own in the Beijing Olympics. One discipline that seemed to find a small place in many people's hearts was the Equestrian team and the likes of Mary King and William Fox-Pitt became household names almost overnight.

What many people might not have considered is how these riders get paired with their Olympic-standard horses in the first place and one of the best 'talent scouts' in the business is Gloucestershire-based Andrea Verdina (39), who runs Verdina Sport Horses in Newent.

As well as training eventers and showjumpers, a large part of Andrea's business, which he runs with his wife, Didi (34), is scouring the globe for young horses

with potential, bringing them on and then selling them to competitive riders. He also spends a good deal of time simply matching horses to clients, with frequent visits to stables in his native Italy, Ireland, Holland and Belgium.

His eagle eye meant that he spotted the early talents of Parkmore Ed when he was just four years old, brought him on and then sold him. William Fox-Pitt went on to ride Parkmore Ed to victory at Burghley in 2007 and then was placed at the Beijing Olympics. He has similarly supplied horses to equine greats such as Fiona Hobbey and Oliver Townend,

So where did this passion for horses first originate? A horsey family back in Italy, perhaps, with several generations of equestrian champions?

"I started riding when I was nine," says Andrea. "My family wasn't horsey at all, but

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I fancied an eight-year-old girl who was riding, so I went riding too!"

Little did he know that a simple school boy crush would lead to such an illustrious career firstly as a competitor and then latterly within the business and training side. Andrea started riding and eventing in Italy and was one of only three people who rode at that time for the Italian Federation, which was a great honour. He competed in European junior championships and was spotted by a lady while on a trip to England in 1996, who asked if he'd like a job as a rider here. Luckily he jumped at the chance, as the stables in question was Cabalva Stud in Wales, where Olympic champion Leslie Law started.

Since arriving on British soil, initially not knowing a word of English, Andrea has been a regular contender at many European eventing championships and was even placed 15th at the Sydney Olympics in 2000.

"The Olympics were a dream come true, a once in a lifetime experience," remembers Andrea. "It's the only competition where you are in contact with a lot of other athletes and it's not just horses. There you are in between what I call real athletes, you see all these different shaped bodies and you're just there sitting around, smoking and having a glass of wine! They're all in bed at six o'clock. The equestrians were the bad boys of the Olympics. In the Olympic Village they had a little disco and it was only horsey people there. It was good fun."

Partying aside, Andrea has worked hard to carve a very definite niche for himself and his business in the equine world. He now considers many of the big equestrian names amongst his friends, and speaks very highly of them. He is keen to point out, however, that the opinion people sometimes have of eventing competitors being reserved or 'stuck-up' is an understandable one but totally unjustified, in his opinion.

"It's natural in a way – if they're quite well-known, there are always people who try to approach them and sometimes you just want your own privacy," says Andrea. "But once you know them as your friends they're all really good people."

"Mary King is a very nice lady, she's been at the top for many years because she manages to keep her head down and keep working. Oli Townsend is an exceptionally good rider and has an exceptional will to win and that's why he may not be that classical but he's winning all the events."

With so many well-known friends and an

Olympic appearance under his belt, Andrea is determined to keep his feet on the ground.

"This sport, the eventing sport, it gives you humility," reveals Andrea. "I've learnt one very important thing, that you have to be down to earth and honest with people, because at the end of the day, the horse can prove you wrong."

His honesty and reliability is a large part of why Andrea's business has flourished, and continues to flourish so well even in this economic downturn. Verdina Sport Horses offers many services including buying and selling horses for clients, training up horses and teaching more accomplished riders. Over the years since he first launched his business back in 2001, Andrea has built up a solid and expansive book of contacts and prides himself on working only with people he trusts.

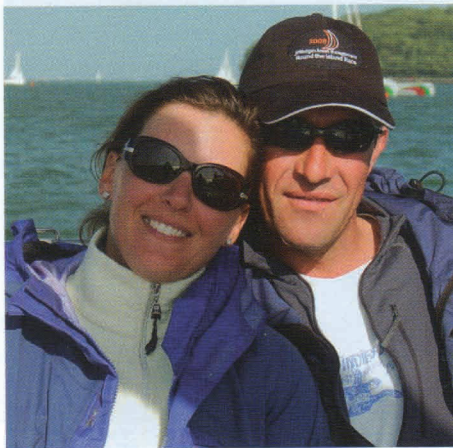
"This business, in different areas, doesn't have a good name sometimes," says Andrea. "People think that because the horse can't talk, that you'll sell them something that is not right. So we are honest and try to match the right person to the right horse."

"People need to trust the experts. There are a lot of people who know us and they know that we are good, professional, reliable and trustworthy. The people who don't know us, it's always difficult to make someone trust you if they don't know you."

This sourcing of horses has become the main part of Andrea's business and while his wife, Didi, looks after the teaching side of the business at home, Andrea loves nothing more than visiting other yards in an attempt to find the perfect horse for his client. He estimates that he went on around 10 of these sorts of trips last year to Italy alone and has had positive feedback from all of his clients for whom he found horses. But how does he know the right horse for the right person?

"If we're lucky enough to see a client ride, that is the easiest way, because I can have a very precise idea of their riding skill," says Andrea. "But I also have a good chat with the client about exactly what they want to do, what their aim is, what their budget is – that's important. We work quite a bit with DVDs too if the horse is too far away."

Often the client will accompany Andrea on these trips to foreign stables and can view up to 40 horses in two days, until the perfect one is chosen. Once the vetting has been done, the horse can be in the UK within a week. This system, says Andrea,



saves the client a lot of time and money, because he only uses places he trusts and has done business with before, and if there is ever a problem with a horse, then it can usually be sorted out easily enough.

Both Andrea and Didi are still keen competitors, a factor that they believe gives them a good insight into their clients' needs and keeps them in with the movers and shakers of the eventing and showjumping world.

Didi also started out very young, but has no idea why she was obsessed from the age of four with having her own horse. She remembers throwing out any 'fake' horses that her parents gave her in an attempt to appease her, insisting she only wanted a real one. She has worked with husband Andrea, since he met her in 2001 on a trip to Italy and convinced her to follow him back to England.

She is now looking forward to getting back into competitive showjumping, having just recovered from a terrifying accident, as she explains:

"I was kicked in the head by a horse last October, right in the middle of my forehead!" says Didi. "I've had four months off and I'm getting fit again, looking for horses to ride and then competing. I don't do riding without competing, I get bored."

Unfortunately their four-year-old daughter has not yet expressed a similar passion for horses, preferring ballet to riding. Even the pony Andrea and Didi bought for her has now 'gone to another castle for another princess'.

They are both keen, however, not to fall into the usual horsey trap of living and breathing horses, with everything else fitting around it. And Didi is proud not to be a member of the equine WAGs, which she insists absolutely exists!

While they both have interests away from the stables, they love being at the heart of the equestrian scene in the Cotswolds, describing it as the best part of England. But even the Cotswolds has been affected by the economic downturn, so has Verdina Sport Horses felt the effects?

"The credit crunch definitely has had an effect on the business generally but in our case, fingers crossed and touch wood, it's not been that bad," says Andrea. "There are always people that buy expensive horses because they know they're not going to be touched by the credit crunch. I think people have got more careful, they think twice before they part with their money, which sometimes with horses is




counter-productive, because if you spend too much time thinking about it then somebody else buys the horse."

With their horses costing anywhere in the region of £10,000 to more than £100,000, there is always going to be a big risk involved, especially with the younger horses that Andrea buys to bring on himself, but he is confident that his ups are still bigger than his downs.

One thing Andrea has learnt is that to be successful in his business, he can't get too attached to his horses.

"You can get attached to the horses you've been together with for a long time and you have good results and you do a few competitions together, you become a team," says Andrea. "But I don't pat them all day and give them sweeties! If you want to do this job properly you have to keep the emotional side separate. If you get attached, you don't want to sell them, and if you don't sell them, you don't make any money."

While he enjoys matching horses to clients and training them up before selling them on, Andrea still relishes the thrill of competing. He currently has his own showjumper that he's bringing on and is looking forward to seeing how far he goes. But what is it that makes horses so special to Andrea?

"Probably the fact that they don't talk!" he reveals. "No, I've been with them all my life and that's what I know. If I'm not with horses, I miss them. I get paid to do what I'd do as a hobby. That's a good thing." 

**Further information**  
[verdinasporthorses.co.uk](http://verdinasporthorses.co.uk)

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 THE RIGHT  
 PERSON TO THE  
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