

Melton Mowbray, hunt each winter and enjoy a reasonably successful career as one of many “mid-level” eventers.

Instead, she went to work for German rider and dealer Dirk Schrade for four winters and has learnt how the most successful national team in the sport do it, and much of her current success can be traced to that.

“After university, I had a summer at home eventing, and towards the end of that I decided I wanted to go away to learn from a top rider. I spoke to Chris Bartle and Dirk was the first person he suggested,” says Willa. “I rang Dirk, and he said, ‘yes, come!’

“I learnt so much from him about what to look for in a young horse and how to produce. I was riding four or five young horses a day, and it was amazing because you just have to get on with it and learn to adapt quickly to a great variety of horses.”

She also benefited from the modern German approach to cross-country schooling.

“If you hunt, you probably only go cross-country schooling once at the beginning of the year,” she says. “I learnt from my time in Germany that young horses need to be taught a lot more about cross-country, especially the German ones who haven’t grown up with that sort of thing like, for example, the Irish horses. I saw how the German riders went cross-country schooling throughout the season — never jumping big stuff, but being very technical in riding and practising lines.

“But the hunting is good for making it happen in that last stride and riding positively. And jumping bloody big stuff out hunting does make the big rider-frightener fence seem possible.”

Recently she has had help from Chris Bartle with her cross-country riding.

“I first went to him on the way up to Hopetoun, and he put my stirrups up five holes. At Hopetoun I went flying out of the front door across country! I think things had to get worse before they got better,” she smiles. “And he took my martingales off. I do believe that is the reason I fell in the water at Pau with Newmarket Vasco One in 2014 — yes, my approach wasn’t good, but you can see on video that as soon as the rein hit the martingale his front legs disappeared

and he couldn’t get his landing gear out.

“Chris keeps it really simple. When you walk a course with him, he breaks it all down to make it seem achievable.”

Dirk found her the chestnut mare Caja 20, whom her father owns along with Willa’s godmother Lady Sarah McCorquodale, and Lauries Laudatio 2, owned by the Sandpiper Syndicate.

“Caja is sharp — even at Blenheim she was prating around in the warm-up and I keep my neckstrap on until the last moment, but in the arena you can ride every movement; she’s incredible,” says Willa. “Lauries Laudatio is a dream — so straightforward. Every day he just wants to work and please you.”

Those two have caught the eye with their significant victories, but Willa was also eighth in Blenheim’s CCI3* on Feena Machin and Peter Thomas’ Chance Remark, whom she hopes will give her

a first Badminton ride next spring. She rode six horses in total at Osberton, including Moonlight Dance S, 10th in the seven-year-old championship, and Cavatina Tinkerbelle, who finished on her dressage score in the six-year-old final.

Neelix, who took her from Pony Club teams to CCI4*, is now 16 but enjoys doing CICs — he was third in the CIC3* at Hartpury — and will do the same next year as long as he is fit and well.

“He’s still number one, definitely,” Willa says fondly.

Talking business

THE Blenheim and Osberton wins have come at an opportune time.

“I said I’d give it five years to see if I could make a career out of eventing, and those five years are now up,” she says.

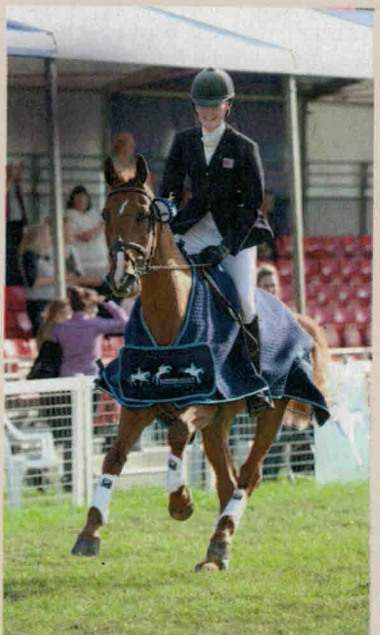
How important is it that eventing is her business, as well an occupation?

“Very,” she says with emphasis. “My goal is senior selection, but for it to be sustainable, it has to work as a business. One of the good horses will probably have to be sold; you can’t not if the right money comes along. But having done it once [produced a young horse to win a big event] will help me to have the confidence to believe I can do it again.”

It will be interesting to watch Willa from here. She has the horses, the support, the temperament and the attitude to be a big player. **H&H**

● **NEXT WEEK:** Michael and John Whitaker

IN PICTURES



Top: winters spent on the hunting field are how it all started — sister Chloe, father Joey and Willa out with their local Belvoir Hunt
Middle: schooling Lauries Laudatio 2 at her base on her parents’ farm in Stonesby, Leics
Above: ‘Caja 20’s sharp, but incredible’ — the mare lands Blenheim’s eight- and nine-year-old CIC3* this year, Willa’s first win at the level