

Young pretender to riding's crown

Can she follow her parents into an Olympics squad?

Sarah Todd profiles Bramham's Royal competitor, Zara Phillips

NEWS that Zara Phillips is competing at next month's Bramham Horse Trials won't distract either her hosts or the spectators.

Yes, her name on the competitors' board will bring a certain frisson of excitement, but not enough to detract from the main business of the event • top-class equestrian competition.

An abiding memory of mine is from 2002, the year the daughter of the Princess Royal and Captain Mark Phillips was competing at the Yorkshire course for the first time.

Sitting at the water jump a friend nudged me, her eyes beckoning mine to look across to the left. "What?" I said, not realising why the slight girl with a baseball cap pulled down over her blonde hair terrier sat on her knee was anybody to get excited about.

"Nothing," whispered back the friend, exasperated at my inability to recognise a member of the Royal Family at less than the length of a dog lead away. Interestingly, not one of the hundreds of people perched on the grassy bank surrounding

that cross country jump let her presence sway them from what they'd set out to see. All eyes remained firmly focused on the horses.

Zara Phillips went on to win the young rider competition at the event (for under 25s), and was widely acknowledged at the time to have enjoyed the relaxed feel of the Yorkshire competition.

Her win also seemed to pull the starting pistol on her ascent into the higher echelons of the sport.

Credit for the event's special atmosphere can largely be put down to George Lane Fox, who founded the trials at his Bramham Park home with his late wife Victoria in 1973.

Even though spectators are now counted in their tens of thousands rather than their hundreds, his motto has steadfastly stayed "keep it for fun".

Interviewing Mr Lane Fox Snr after Zara's win he admitted her presence had put the event under a new kind of spotlight, but declared: "I feel very strongly that however successful it becomes we shouldn't get pompous - it should still be a family event."

Four years on and that lack of pretension - the younger Lane Fox family members dash around helping in their jeans and fleeces - is just as evident.

But back to this latest visit to Yorkshire by the Queen's granddaughter, whose unusual name means "bright as the dawn".

Having recently celebrated her 25th birthday, this will be the last year Zara can compete in the young rider competition. She will be riding the big Irish-bred horse Ardfield Magic Star.

The most important message to communicate about her is that even though Zara is competing in the Under 25s section, she is no wet-behind-the-ears newcomer. After her Bramham win in 2002, she went on in 2003 to really establish herself at senior level by finishing second to Olympic medalist and Grand Slam champion Pippa Funnell in the main competition at Burghley - an amazing achievement in only her first four-star event.

The then 22 year-old was longlisted for Athens 2004, but her hopes of emulating her parents' Olympic records were dashed when her big chestnut gelding, Toytown, was injured.

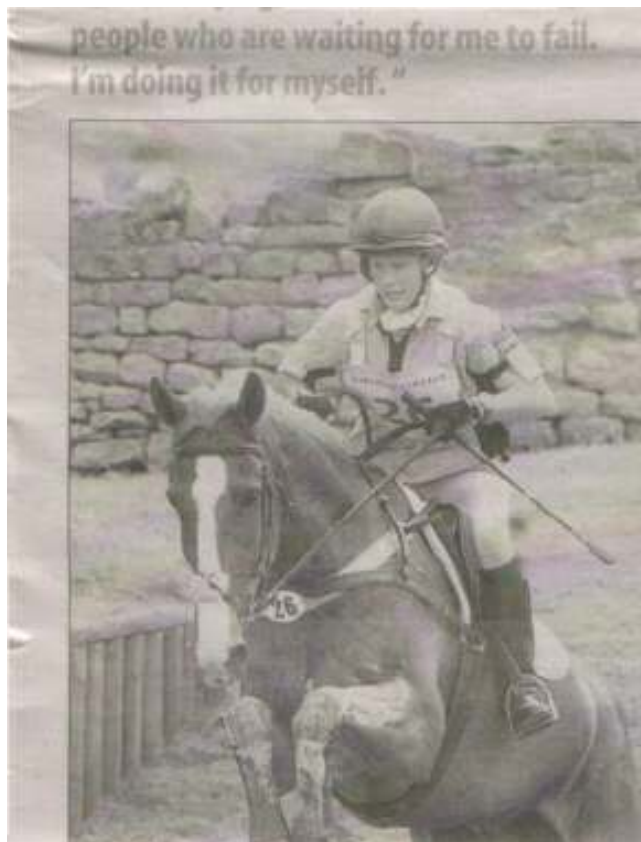
The Princess Royal rode for Great Britain in the 1976 Olympic Games, while Captain Mark Phillips was a member of the gold medal winning team at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

Undaunted by the disappointment of missing out, Zara continued her climb up the ranks.

In 2005, she claimed the individual gold medal at the European Three-day Eventing Championships at Blenheim Palace (an award her mother won back in 1971) and last year was rounded off with her being named the *Sunday Times* Sportswoman of the Year.

She beat a shortlist of six which included Dame Ellen MacArthur and Paula Radcliffe and was accompanied to the ceremony by Mike Tindall, her Yorkshire-born England rugby player boyfriend.

As time ticks on, she must be a very serious contender for a



place in the Beijing 2008 Olympic squad After her A-levels. **Zara** spent time in Australia and New Zealand before 'qualifying as an equine physiotherapist at Exeter university. . In addition to her unquestionable skill as a horsewoman she has also inherited her family's love of racing and somehow finds time to be patron of several charities.

A telling quote of hers is: "I'm not trying to succeed for the people who are waiting for me to fail. I'm doing it for myself. I'm one for the 'You only live once so you should do as much as you can" sort of thing". Finally, Zara is reported as saying that if she hadn't followed an equestrian career she would maybe have gone into fashion.

For the thousands planning a visit to this year's Bramham Horse Trials (June 8 to 11) fashion's loss is their gain.

And anyway, these horse trials have plenty of clothes stalls for her to indulge that passion.



who will be riding at Bramham.

Picture: Mike Finn-Keiray/Reuters