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# 'He's a man with a masterplan'

He's the British number one, has two of the best horses in the country and has just broken into the top 10 world rankings. And he's only 27. Could life get any better for Ben Maher? Jennifer Donald reckons the best is yet to come



**T**HE last time *H&H* visited Ben Maher he was a fresh-faced 22-year-old, propelled into the spotlight by the rare feat of winning the Hickstead Derby and speed Derby in the

same year. The headline to accompany that interview read "He'll be one of the world's best".

That prophecy was spot on. Five years later, the now 27-year-old is British number one, has become the first British rider since John Whitaker in 2008 to enter the world top 10 and he has represented his country at the Olympics. Ben is newly married and greets us at his plush yard in Hertfordshire – home to the phenomenal trio of Robin Hood W, Wonderboy III and the newly acquired Toklund, as well as a pool of talented young wannabes, including 2012 prospect Triple X.

But it's been far from plain sailing for this reluctant celebrity in the intervening years: 2008 was Ben's annus horribilis – he lost the ride on Rolette, his "horse of a lifetime", shortly after a heartbreaking result in the Olympics in Hong Kong and all the while a dispute with a former groom was rumbling through the courts.

All charges against Ben and his then fiancée Kathleen were dropped but all this could have been enough to fell most riders. But, as becomes apparent from chatting to Ben, and to those who know him, he is Mr Positivity and his friendly exterior masks a competitive streak that has taken him to the very top of his game.



Ben with his wife of six months, Kathleen, who he met at Hickstead, at their Hertfordshire home

### If at first you don't succeed...

THIS precision and will to win manifested itself from an early age. Ben may have been born with a silver spoon in his

mouth – his father Richard is a property developer – but he certainly wasn't born in the saddle. His mother rode as a hobby and Ben, as most children do, was given a leg-up on a naughty Shetland around the age of five. He soon joined the Pony Club and "had a go at everything", although there was little indication they had a future Olympic showjumper in their midst.

"I literally fell off every time," laughs Ben. "But even at that stage, I remember practising for two days before a cross-country. On the day, I fell off and my pony ran away, but there was already something in me at that point."

As the size and ability of the ponies grew, so did Ben's fervour for the coloured obstacles. With it came help from former international

rider Steven Smith, brother of Robert and son of Harvey, and Ben got lucky with an old pony called Dusty Boy who took him to two pony European team gold medals.

"He had been everywhere and was very good for me," says Ben of the prolific dun.

A talented pony always helps, but Ben's natural horsemanship shone through, as *H&H* reported from Hartpury in 1997: "The baby of the squad, 14-year-old full-back Ben Maher was reminiscent of his idol John Whitaker when producing a terrific clear on Dusty Boy."

While riding took centre stage, school became even more of the chore. Ben's bags were already packed when he finished his final exam at the age of 16 and he was taken under the albatross-sized wing of Liz and Ted Edgar.

"Not being horsey, my parents were advised at that time to send me somewhere to serve an apprenticeship," says Ben. "I don't know whose idea it was, but I have to thank them for it!"

After two years in Warwickshire, Ben was keen to be pushed out of his comfort zone and was offered a two-week stay with Olympic silver medallist Beat Mandli in Switzerland. A fortnight turned into a full-time job where Ben thrived on the long hours and hard graft.

"If I look back now it was the hardest work, ☐"

## Ben Maher timeline

**1998:** wins second European pony team gold

**2004:** wins young rider European team gold

**2005:** wins Hickstead Derby and speed Derby

**2006:** Named best up and coming rider by BS

**2008:** Represents GB at Beijing Olympics

**2009:** In GB team at European championships

**2010:** Becomes number six in the world

Like chalk and cheese:  
Ben with his stable  
stars, the 'strong  
willed' Robin Hood W  
and 'sensitive'  
Wonderboy III



# Showjumping special Ben Maher

but I learned everything," he says. "Beat is an unbelievable horseman. It was very structured, but I base what I do here now on that system."

And that quiet, refined technique Ben is famous for? He learned that in Switzerland, too.

"The majority of my riding style would have come from Beat," he says. "He worked very hard at being balanced and controlled."

It was Ben's equivalent of further education – the Beat Mandli school of horsemanship, competition and life.

"If I hadn't gone to Beat, I do wonder whether I would have ended up in this position," ponders Ben over his glass of orange juice. "I had no pressures, no bills and no problems. I just did whatever was on my list to do that day."

## Out of the shadows

BUT all good things must come to an end and when Beat found a new sponsor and moved away, 18-year-old Ben returned to England. As many young riders find when they take the first tentative steps on their own, it can be overwhelming. Ben is the first to admit that he struggled.

"I'd worked long hours and not had many days off while I was over there – which didn't faze me at all. But after a year and a half it took its toll. When I came home I was told I didn't look very well!" he says. "I had no good horses and had been looked after for so long that I didn't know where to start."

Fate once again lent a hand and South African-born David McPherson stepped in to help Ben "do his own thing", then within a couple of years he was again training with Steven Smith.

And before you know it, we're back at Hickstead in 2005 with 22-year-old Ben lifting the coveted Boomerang Trophy. Was it really that sudden?

"It was a bit of a shock, but we went there very well prepared, thinking that we could do it, but to win both was quite a big thing," he says, with typical understatement, of the double on his father's horses Alfredo and Mercurius. "I won with Steven's help and it catapulted me out of young riders and into the bigger, wider world – I've never looked back."



Longstanding groom Daley Fisher is part of the hard-working team behind the scenes



Ben and Dusty Boy winning the first of two pony European team golds and (inset) gracing the cover of the H&H showjumping special 11 years ago



Even at the age of 22, Ben recognised a business opportunity and used this "big break" to get the extra help he needed. Sponsors and owners came knocking – most notably Emma and Michael Phillips from Quainton Stud, with whom Ben is still heavily associated and who, four years on, he now considers close friends.

The biggest advantage of this turnaround in fortune was that Ben could afford to be more picky with his horsepower, but it took trial and error. He earned his Union flag on Nations Cups and began riding in World Cups, but "there was a bit of scratching around and we were struggling a bit with what we had".

## 'She changed my life'

AND then it all clicked into place. Rolette. The mare who knocked the Maher globe off its axis and on to a whole new trajectory.

"She changed my life," says Ben simply.

Rolette was bought by Daniel Paul and arrived on Ben's yard as a complete unknown. But within 10 months the pair were on the plane to Hong Kong to compete in the 2008 Olympics.

"I still can't believe how it happened," says Ben, whose eyes light up as he talks about this incredible mare. "She had a fantastic brain and we were put together very well – my system and style of riding suited the way she wanted to be and that's why we did so much so quickly."

But this story has anything but a fairy-tale ending. The 2008 Olympics promised so much, but an injury-strewn three-man British team faced an uphill task for medals.

Even more heartbreaking for Ben was that, having jumped immaculately through nearly

every round, the individual medal-decider was one round too many for Rolette in the humidity and she left with an uncharacteristic 20 faults.

"To this day, I've still haven't watched the video of the Olympics," says Ben. "I had six or seven fences to jump and I would have had a medal – but it went down the drain. I'm a big believer that you've got to take your chances while you can and I genuinely thought that was my time for a medal. Deep down, I was gutted for a very long time."

And just when Ben thought it couldn't get any worse, Rolette was sold to the USA for Irishman Shane Sweetnam to ride. Almost as quickly as she arrived, the heroine was gone. But while this exchange may not have worked out for all parties – "the people know we're here if they need help," says Ben graciously – Ben is never one to dwell on what might have been.

"She had to move on for whatever reason, but the wave of Rolette has pushed my ranking and confidence – and my belief in things in general," he explains, with a glass half-full clarity. "Everybody's dream is to ride in the Olympics and she gave me that. I'm still benefiting from her. Everything I've got here is down to that horse – hence the fact she's got pride of place up there [pointing to a huge picture hanging on the wall]. I don't believe in too much luck, but she's the one that put us on the map."

Has Ben had his fingers burnt by the loss?

"I am lucky with my owners – honesty is the best thing," he says. "If somebody says 'I need to sell because I need the money' then I understand that. But it would be fantastic if an owner said here's a big pool of money, we want to be world number one and win the Olympics." >>>

# Showjumping special Ben Maher

» **'I genuinely thought that was my time for a medal': competing in the 2008 Olympics with Rolette**



## The legend of Robin Hood

THERE was another reason for Ben's continued optimism. Rolette may have left some mighty shoes to fill, but they were already being nailed on to an exciting gelding by the name of Robin Hood W, who has since proved a British team linchpin and exceptional World Cup horse.

We meet Robin in his "lucky stable" on the former stud farm that has been transformed into a multi-yard showjumping complex — one for the 15 or so trainees based with Ben and an American barn for his own horses, all surrounded by neat paddocks. There's plenty of "work in progress", but the changes are made under the watchful eye of another equine legend, Mill Reef, who is buried there. There is not a stray shaving in sight and the tackrooms are in neat working order — right down to the show bridles ready with all the buckles in the correct holes.

"It's not a show home though, this is a busy working yard," he stresses. "I am hands-on — there's always more to do on my list. We work hard — probably too hard!"

Ben's team are all young, loyal and committed — something that fits into his work ethic.

"I don't like people on the yard who aren't



I don't like people on the yard who aren't winners because that mentality seeps into me in the long run. I hate negativity

**Ben Maher**  
on his work ethic



winners because that mentality seeps into me in the long run," he says. "I hate negativity. I choose to work hard and, if people see you working hard, they work hard in return."

With horses vying for his attention 24/7, do Ben and his wife Kathleen ever enjoy time off?

"If I took off two days in a month that would be a good thing," says Ben. "But then, we don't have the worst lifestyle."

## Ben's top three



### Robin Hood W

12yo KWPN gelding by Animo, owned by Ben and Quainton Stud. "He's a bit of a bully — he's afraid of nothing at all and is quite strong willed."



### Wonderboy III

11yo BWP gelding by Flamenco De Semilly, owned by Ben and Quainton Stud. "He's very sensitive for such a huge horse. He was bought for the big things."



### Toklund

10yo KWPN gelding by Oklund, owned by Rolette's former owner Daniel Paul. "He's very strong to ride!"

And, with regular trips abroad, there's always something to prepare for. Life on the road, Ben accepts, is part of the job, but he's lost count of how many planes he's been on recently.

"I'm lucky in that I can go to almost any show in the world at the moment and I don't know how long that will last," he says.

With the luxury of three top horses — Robin Hood W, Wonderboy III and Toklund, bought by Rolette's former owner Daniel Paul — no one horse is steamrollered by too many competitions.

"I tend to go with horses that have big brains and big hearts," says Ben. "We do train hard but try to do everything right for them and they give us a bit back. If they've got good attitude, that always shows through in the end."

## Time for a change

BEN has been fairly outspoken on the state of British showjumping, but it is no surprise to hear his optimism about the future.

"I don't want to become one of the stereotype older [riders] who speak out for the wrong reasons," says Ben. "But now I know enough so if I speak my mind, it's only because I want to make things better for the sport, not to benefit myself."

"I don't think showjumping is in as bad a state as everyone says it is. A few wrong decisions at the wrong time have been huge — Hong Kong, for example. We were two horses down when we started. And that has affected me."

"It's come to a head and everybody seems angry. But it might make people realise we've got to get our act together if we want to win."

"It's not just about what happens in the ring though — in showjumping there's a lot of dealing going on behind the scenes and sponsors changing hands, so you're always going to get negative feelings. It's the team manager's job to keep those things under control so that when you go as a team you all fight for the same cause."

And with London 2012 on the horizon and exciting young horses coming through the ranks, you can be sure that Ben will be fighting for that cause — it's part of his masterplan. H&H

## What makes Ben so good?

**Liz Edgar:** "I first watched Ben at the Royal when he was on Dusty Boy and admired the way he rode, his attitude and his mother was with him and he had such respect for her. That really caught my eye. He has everything a showjumper should have — he's natural and only the best riders have that. We've followed him all the way."



much effort into getting the horses prepared and the job in-hand. He's a real worker."

**Tim Stockdale:** "Ben's an all-round professional. His riding is top quality, even between the fences he gets it spot on. He puts so

**Emma Phillips:** "As well as being extremely talented, he's a perfectionist. He plans every round on every horse and if he makes a mistake in the ring, he'll go away and practise the line or the fence on different horses until he gets it right. He is a man with a masterplan."

