

I had been banging on to my family about Lowther for months. Both son Dougal and former husband Simon are keen field sportsmen and, whether out of interest or simply to shut me up, they and wives Christie and Ainslie decided a visit to Lowther was a must. To my great relief family Bain later agreed it was well worth the trip and the whole experience had been beyond their expectations!!! As an added bonus, on learning of guests travelling all the way from down under the Lowther Committee very kindly presented them with free tickets and programs for the whole event.

Lowther is in the Lake District and notoriously wet. This year was no exception. A large tractor met competitors at the gate to tow them on to the parking area. Once positioned each truck settled to the axels within a few minutes with assurances from the tractor operators that they would return to extract us as the need arose. We set up camp as best we could then squelched off on our first tour of the obstacles.

As always, the combined driving event is run in conjunction with the Lowther Game Fair which, according to those in the know, is regarded as the best of its kind in the country. The marathon obstacles are built within the fairground which lies between the castle and the river.

Family Bain arrived the following day and were suitably impressed. Back-stepper Shaun rang to say there was an almighty delay on the M6 motorway and therefore he wouldn't be joining us any time soon.

The dressage arena and surrounding warm-up areas were heavy going so warming up was kept to a minimum. Unfortunately, although there were plenty of entries in the lower classes there were only two Advanced horses competing. As we finished our test I heard the commentator say we had restored his faith in dressage. It was a nice way to start although winning our class wasn't exactly earth shattering. Since our arrival in the UK I have become quite well acquainted with our opponent, Lynda Christiansen who hails from the Isle of Man. Lynda refers to the pair of us as "we Advanced Ladies" which in terms of experience means her and in terms of age means me!

Marathon day. The rain eased off, leaving a steep, sodden track and very heavy going. Part way round I commented to Shaun that nobody was going to make the time in Section A and backed off accordingly. A big mistake as I later found there were few with time penalties whilst we had 18!!! Seems everyone else in England is competent and at home driving in a bog. I couldn't help wondering (a trifle bitterly) how the Brits would cope with ground like concrete and temperatures anything over 25 degrees?

At the halt we were told the infamous Lowther Bridge had become so treacherous that although they had spread the surface with grit, drivers were advised to take the slow route down the bank beside it. A quick conflagration between Lynda and myself had us agreeing to drive the bridge anyway, but walk down which was disappointing because the bridge is part of the spirit of Lowther. As it turned out, neither of us were able to comply because once half way down, both horses sped up – pushed by the gradient and the weight of the carriage. Otherwise we had a good round and again, the most complicated obstacle drove the best – and we were the faster.

The Derby course next day saw Lynda take first place for the overall competition – thanks to our penalties in Section A. Another lesson learned but with a horse in good condition for the National Championships a few weeks later.

In the meantime, between visits to every known field sport past-time in England and observation of a plethora of different sporting dog breeds, Family Bain had been there to watch us in each phase. Never having witnessed a marathon before, daughter-in-law Christie confessed to keeping her eyes shut most of the time when we were in the obstacles though. They returned to Australia muddier but a lot better informed about game fairs. We were first cab off the rank when it came to being towed out and arrived home safely with a mountain of washing and an awful lot of harness to clean. To my great relief, Barry has taken on the mantle of chief carriage cleaner which is an absolute God-send except when he chides me for getting them dirty again.

Cirencester took place three weeks later, again under very wet conditions, with twelve horses qualified for the Advanced class. I think nine started and seven finished and I am sorry to say that at the end of the competition we were the 7th.

A good dressage test left us in 2nd place to start. The rain was intermittent and on occasions, vicious. We diverted during our obstacle walking to watch my trainer and mentor Wilf Bowman-Ripley's team do their test which started well, without rain to strains of Mendelssohn's Wedding March in the background. Then the rain started – gently at first – but just enough to make one of the spectators near C put their umbrella up at a critical moment and scare the socks off the leaders who made it plain that they weren't going back there any time soon. For a moment it looked as though things might turn VERY ugly but Wilf persuaded them otherwise and continued, culminating with the briefest salute on record in an effort to keep the rain from running down his neck!!

The next day we started Section A heralded by thunder and lightning. Rather daunting under the circumstances as much of the first phase was through wooded areas. We were on time at the Halt which was cold, wet and miserable for everyone. The going was getting heavier by the minute. The first obstacle was flagged with B and E side by side; an open invitation to go the wrong way. I was very positive about which route Michael was supposed to follow but it never even occurred to me that he might line up F on the way out – which took me completely by surprise. I was able to stop him before we had passed right through it but we lost a lot of time backing out. (Note to self. From now on keep possible "Michael choices" in mind when walking obstacles – particularly the not immediately obvious ones!) The rest of the course went without any serious blunders and I was surprised and disappointed to find we had dropped to 6th. The cones course was more straight- forward than I expected of a Championship course but the time was very tight. On the basis that we had nothing to lose I opted for speed and paid the price. Well, sort of. There had only been one double clear. We had three down but were 19 seconds under time which was quite an achievement and even Wilf – who never lets me get away with anything and rarely offers praise, said I had driven it well and had been a bit unlucky.

So that was our season done. I was awarded the Fenix Single Horse Driver of the Year. Michael had come through unscathed, never lower than 3rd in the dressage phase, a better horse for the overall experience and with an ever expanding fan club.

In spite of all this, I have to admit to being disappointed although (from memory) our worst score in the 3* test had been 58.? and our best 43.? which was well within the qualifying score of 65 or less for the World Singles Championship in 2018. Our cones had improved out of sight but I had expected better results in the marathon. It wasn't until Barry, the Team Gail Force dresser-upper for the pretty bits, carriage polisher, truck driver, sports psychologist and most importantly statistician, pointed out that at the beginning of the season we were on average about 10 seconds behind the first horse in each obstacle and at the end of the season we were on average about 5 seconds behind the first horse etc. Given another season, who knew where we could go?

And on the strength of that and the support of the team sports psychologist etc (see above) that is exactly what we have decided to do. Michael will stay at Ashfields for another year. Barry and I are on our way back to Australia and Wilf is already planning our training sessions for 2018.

So, to those in the southern hemisphere – we are looking forward to seeing you soon and for those in the northern hemisphere – see you in 2018.

With lotsalove and thanks for your support. Team Gail Force.