

# MEDIA MATTERS

Finding yourself in the media spotlight can be daunting for even the most experienced of riders  
Leslie Bliss asks the experts how they deal with the press



**W**orld Class team captain Richard Darison is widely regarded as the PR guru for the sport in this country. Even Britain's leading rider and the equestrian journalist's favourite 'next-a-quester' Carl Hester turns to him for advice at times.

Richard, who comes from a marketing background, having started his working life in his father's company, is adamant that he doesn't even recognise the phrase "dealing with the press".

"It's about 'working with the press'," he says. "Every industry needs the press. I was brought up in a business where I spent every day discussing press releases, promotional ideas, etc, with journalists and editors. Riders cannot manage without them. Every owner wants to see their name in print and it's the lifeblood of sponsorship deals."

Most riders only ever deal with the equestrian press, who are renowned for being pretty "harmless".

As Katie Price's trainer, Andrew Gould has been in the spotlight more than most and makes a clear distinction between the different kinds of media.

"Magazine and newspaper press always want damaging stories, so I try to stay clear of them. Equestrian and sport journalists are different as

they are there to help promote dressage and the riders," says Andrew, who has had the benefit of his wife Polly's media training experience.

"Polly works in public relations and she advises me how to handle things. I always try to look presentable and am always polite and professional, answering the question that needs to be answered," says Andrew. "The most important thing is not to be pressured into giving an answer. Think about the question and answer it in your head first. Take your time."

## Understanding journalists

Richard's advice is to understand the journalists' job and help them.

"Every journal is limited on word space, so short, snappy quotes are better. Then don't get over-sensitive if it doesn't appear how you thought. The reporter provides the copy to the sub-editor, who puts it into the right style for the publication and checks it, then the designer makes up the page and the sub-editor will have to cut the words to make the copy fit the design, the editor reads it and may make alterations and so on. Pictures, news pieces, adverts all have an effect on the finished article."

"With difficult questions, be clear as to what your message is and do not be tempted to expand. I don't subscribe to the practice of giving an answer to a different question to the

one that was asked as it can do more harm than good. Being unavailable for comment is, in my experience, unwise also, unless there are legal issues. If you want to work long-term with the equestrian press, don't put them in a difficult position by telling something which is not true. Sometimes we just have to take criticism on the chin and appreciate the journalists must do their job in order to keep their job."

## The right quotes...

At the end of the day, riders are asked mostly performance-related questions and this has its pitfalls, as British Dressage marketing manager Claire Booth explains.

"The biggest challenge is extracting the interesting quotes from the riders. Over and over again, you hear the same phrases. The top five ones to avoid are: 'I'm really pleased', 'he was really with me', 'we know each other so well', 'he's so trainable', and 'he's the perfect horse'," says Claire, who runs the press office at the national championships and is responsible for producing press releases for national and regional publications.

"We like to hear about the highlights of the test, anecdotes, funny stories about the horse, about its personality, challenges you've overcome and other insights."

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Media spotlight: Katie Price made the headlines with her HOYS debut with Andrew Gould and Henry Boswell in 2008

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Carl is an expert at media interaction and makes it look so easy.

"It boils down to confidence and personality. Then it's all about the PR product, PR and passion. I was not a confident child and came from the tiny island of Sark. Success came quickly and I had to learn to deal with publicity quickly. You have to learn to sell the sport. You're not only representing yourself, but also everyone in dressage."

"I never get fed up with it. I was a 'no-one' once and always wanted to be one of those professionals who make the time to talk to

people, however mundane the questions."

Even when a test goes wrong, Carl does not shy away from the reporters.

"It is hard, but you have to be philosophical. Take two deep breaths and be constructive, otherwise you will come across as a whinging brat. You have to be prepared that the questions are not always about good things and have to turn it around and find the positive."

But even Carl makes mistakes and recalls a quote published in Horse & Hound's Athens Olympic preview, which ended up as the magazine's quote of the year in 2004.

"I was angry that everybody was putting Escapado down after his Aachen performance in the run-up to the Athens Olympics, criticising him for being on the team. I said something like: 'I'm going to shove two fingers in the air at all the doubters'. It was a dangerous thing to say. When I saw it in print, I realised what a huge gamble I had taken. I meant what I said at the time, but then had to prove it. Fortunately, we did well and it worked in my favour."

At Olympic level, there is the added pressure of radio and television to deal with.

"Having a mic shoved in your face after test is pretty daunting to begin with, but you have to focus on the person interviewing you, not the mic," advises Carl.

Richard, who started doing videos and voice-overs in 1979, has also had a couple of awkward experiences.

"During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the camera crew and sound engineers trailed me as team manager. You know that 99% of what they film will not be used and you're

only on for a flash of a moment so, after a while, you forget they are there and get on with the job. It wasn't a great Olympics for us team-wise and, after our first rider had done their test, the BBC sent a message asking if I would mind not mouthing the 'F' word when our horses made mistakes."

Richard also learnt to research carefully any journalists interviewing him after Anky van Grunven's husband Sjef Janssen played a trick on him.

"I received a phone call asking if I would be a guest on a Dutch TV show during the World Cup Final in Holland a couple of years ago. Sjef told me the interviewer was Holland's equivalent to Ruby Wax."

"Sure enough, every question seemed to have a double-entendre - think Graham Norton - such as 'what does it feel like to have such power between your legs' and, determined not to look dull, I duly entered into the spirit of the show by answering every question with a good measure of flirtation.

"With a group of riders and members of the World Cup organising committee and sponsors, we settled down to watch the programme in the hotel lobby. It didn't take many minutes before I realised I had made a terrible mistake; it was more like Newsnight and wasn't meant to be the least bit funny."

Carl also cautions care: "Equestrian magazines have changed so much. You have to be prepared that people want to know more about you than 10 years ago. Nowadays, your whole life is spread in front of everybody in Hefor and OK style. At the end of the day, people want to know what goes on behind the scenes because that's what sells."



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