

BRITISH

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# DRESSAGE

## TALENT SPOTTER

Dan Sherriff on his passion for training and grand prix ambitions



### INSIDE

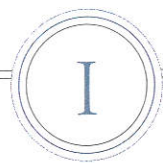
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**SCHEDULES** 1 APRIL - 14 MAY 2012



INTERVIEW



# SHERRIF'S LAW

Two years ago, Dan Sherriff returned to the grand prix scene after a 10-year break.

**LESLIE BLISS** meets the self-effacing rider, winner of the first Talent Spotting competition, and finds out what's next

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHARLIE BEST**

**With his distinctive white hair,** 43-year-old Dan Sherriff is one of the most recognisable people on the dressage scene. Having started to go grey at 16, it took him a while to adjust to his distinguished looks.

Dan says: "A few years ago, when I was working for Judy Harvey, I tried to dye it with the help of the girls at the yard. When Judy saw it, she went ballistic, partly because she knew my parents would disapprove. She told me to 'get that awful colour out of your hair'. I have to admit that it did look hideous!"

He now proudly describes his hair colour as 'arctic blond': "I couldn't believe it the other day

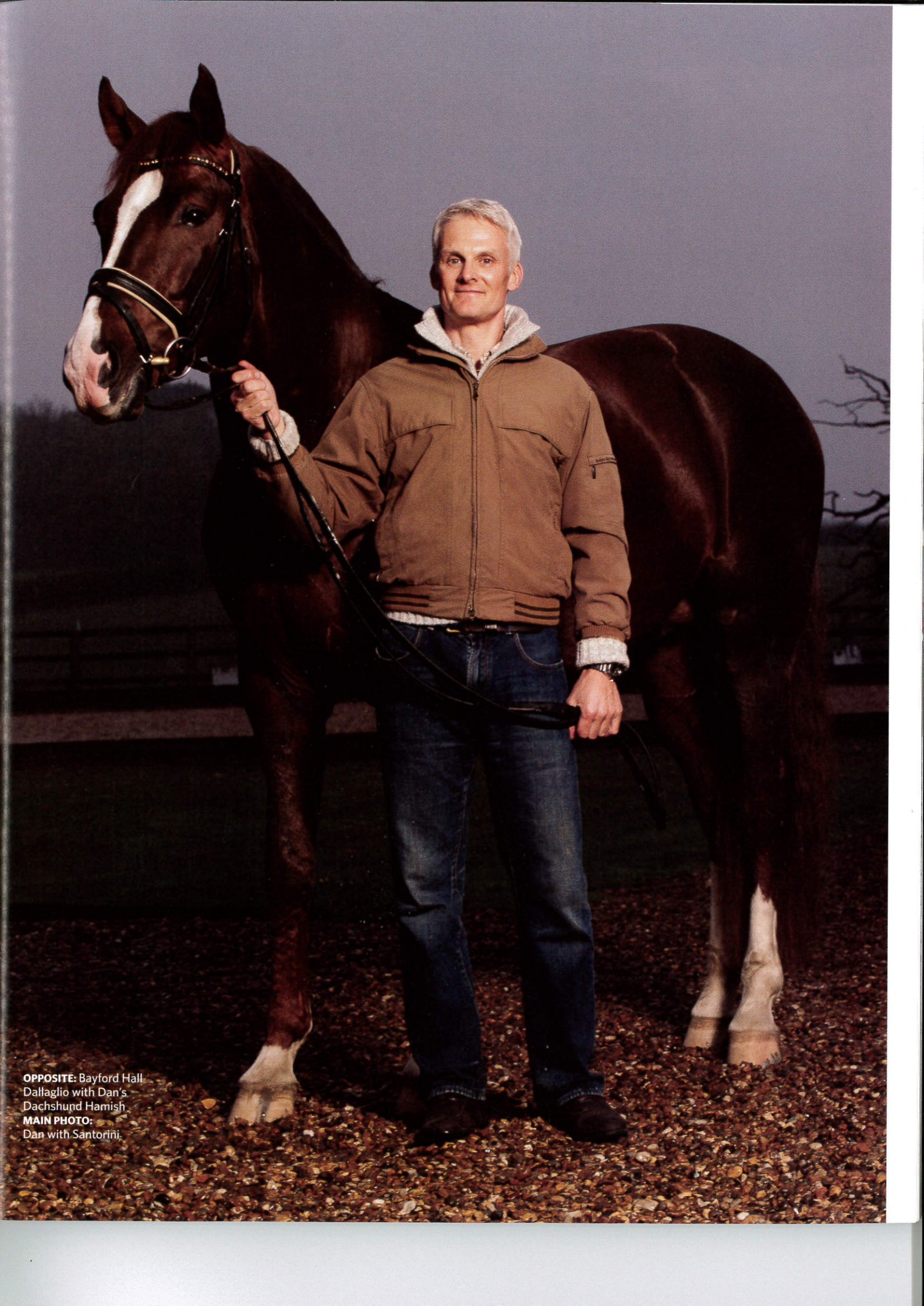
when I was watching telly and there was Phillip Schofield stealing my line!"

Articulate and open, ask Dan to talk about his achievements and he becomes hesitant – and even uncomfortable.

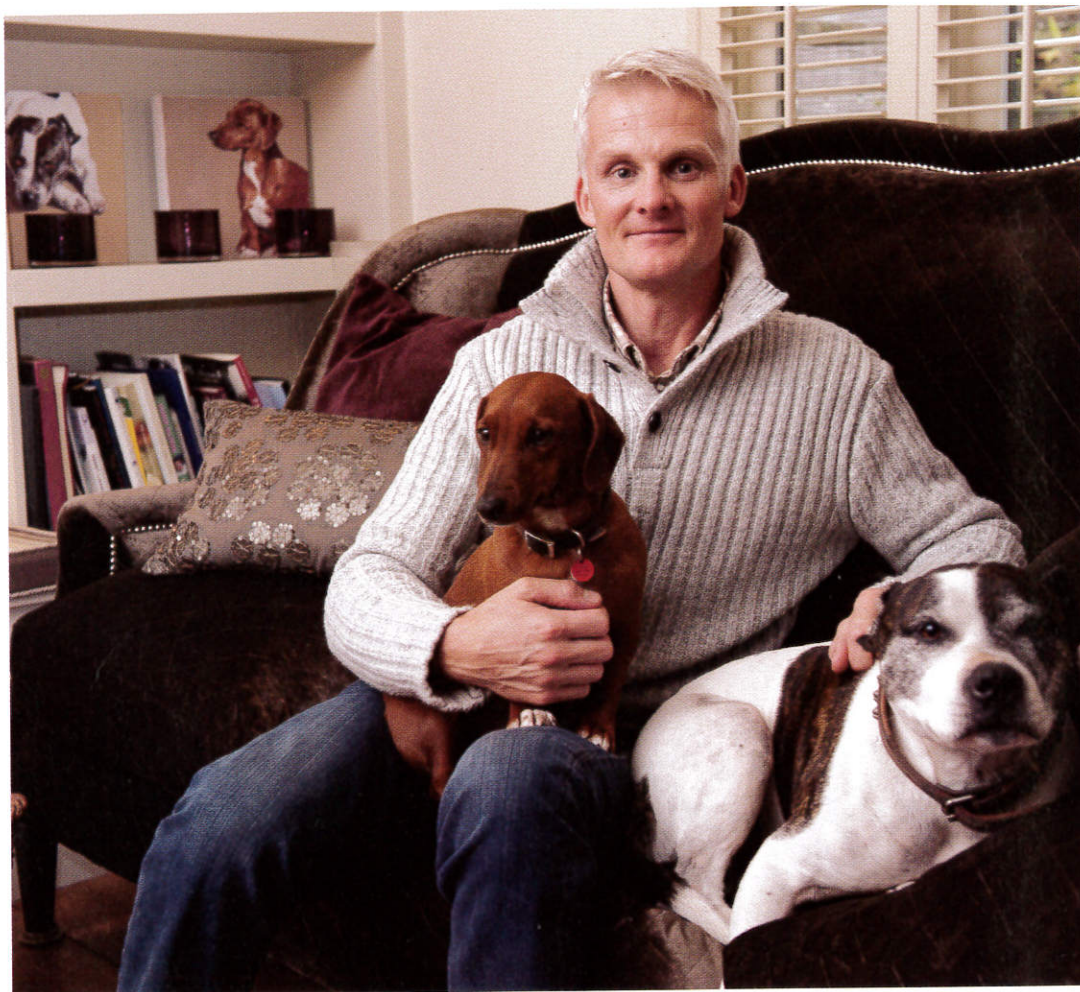
"I hate self-puffery. It inspires jealousy and is such bad manners. As an Englishman, it makes me cringe. I am trying to embrace Facebook, which seems to encourage it, but it does go against the grain," says the farmer's son, who grew up helping to rear the family's cattle and sheep.

Despite his father being 'anti-horses', Dan enjoyed a





**OPPOSITE:** Bayford Hall  
Dallaglio with Dan's  
Dachshund Hamish  
**MAIN PHOTO:**  
Dan with Santorini.



childhood tearing around on scruffy ponies. “He tried to steer me away from horses as he believes it’s a case of ‘horses and divorces’, but I’ve always been passionate about them. I was lucky to be a member of the Enfield Chace branch of The Pony Club. We had Raymond Brooks-Ward as our hunt master, Claire Tomlinson’s dad Arthur Lucas taught us polo and our District Commissioner was a list 1 judge.”

This experience all helped Dan when he took his Pony Club ‘A’ test, which he passed with honours in 1986.

“At the time, I did not appreciate what an accolade it was and that only about 20 people have ever achieved it. It didn’t sink in until much later when *Horse &*

*Hound* published a feature about it, interviewing all those, including me, with ‘A’ test honours.”

Dan is the first to admit that he is “not good academically”.

“But I was good at arts, drama and sport, which is probably why dressage suits me. I love the showmanship side of it and am lucky to have found something

I was good at, at such a young age.”

“I hate self-puffery. It inspires jealousy and is such bad manners. As an Englishman, it makes me cringe”

**Talent Spotting winner**

Also in 1986, Dan became the first Talent Spotting winner and has since been exposed to some of the best trainers in the world through various scholarship schemes, and as a member of several squads, which has included being an Olympic squad member. His most important

mentors have been David Hunt, with whom he has trained for 20 years, and Judy Harvey.

“All the trainers I have come across have influenced me in some way. David is all about training horses. He is so eloquent yet, a man of few words. Judy won’t like me saying this, but she has been like a mother to me, despite there being little age difference between us, looking after me, teaching me discipline and organisation. She has always been a stickler for routine.”

Dan stresses the importance of having good all-round business acumen in his line of work.

“I remember going to visit Richard Davison as part of my Lady Joicey Scholarship. I really admire his media skills and his words of advice have stuck with me to this day. He told me to return every phone call and to allow time for bookkeeping if you cannot afford to delegate these tasks, as it is not just a matter of

**TOP LEFT:** Dan with Hamish and Staffordshire bull terrier ‘rescue dog’ Rocky **MAIN PHOTO:** Dan with his own grand prix ride, the 13-year-old stallion Bayford Hall Dallaglio



going down the centre line and winning a medal. That's only 50% of the job of being a successful dressage rider as you have to generate income by working the media and networking, unless you are privileged enough not to have to worry about money," he says, acknowledging immediately that he is extremely fortunate to have a supportive family and live in a converted granary on the 400-acre family farm.

The farm also provides homes for his parents, as well as his sister and family, who live in the farmhouse and other converted barns on the property.

Dan's section looks extremely modest from the outside, but opens up into an immaculately styled Tardis that would make a lovely setting for an interior design magazine.

"I did a lot of the work myself, from the planning permission to sawing wood, and enjoy the creativity of property developing and interior design," says Dan, who is in the process of having a courtyard garden built.

A self-confessed home-bird, Dan says: "I love living here. I have lived in Scotland, when I was working at Gleneagles, and also in Gloucestershire and Denmark, but I have everything here: my family, fabulous facilities and we're only 20 miles from London."

The open-plan lounge/kitchen is dominated by an oil painting by Sally Martin, which hangs over the mantelpiece. It's of his current grand prix ride, Bayford Hall Dallaglio, known as Lawrence, and was given to him by his mum for his 40th birthday.

This birthday was a particularly important turning point in Dan's life in many ways: "Once I turned 40, I took stock of my life as I was not happy with my lack of achievement and I was earning a teenager's salary. You could say I had a bit of a crisis. I gave up running the livery business and now the stables are run by Rose Emberton, with whom I keep my horses in full livery.

It was also around this time that he met his other half, >>

Graham Watson, who has turned out to be the perfect partner in business and life. "I know that my weaknesses are bookkeeping and organising, so I am fortunate to have Graham, who also happens to be much better than me in these areas as he is a qualified accountant and has worked in fundraising and marketing in the past."

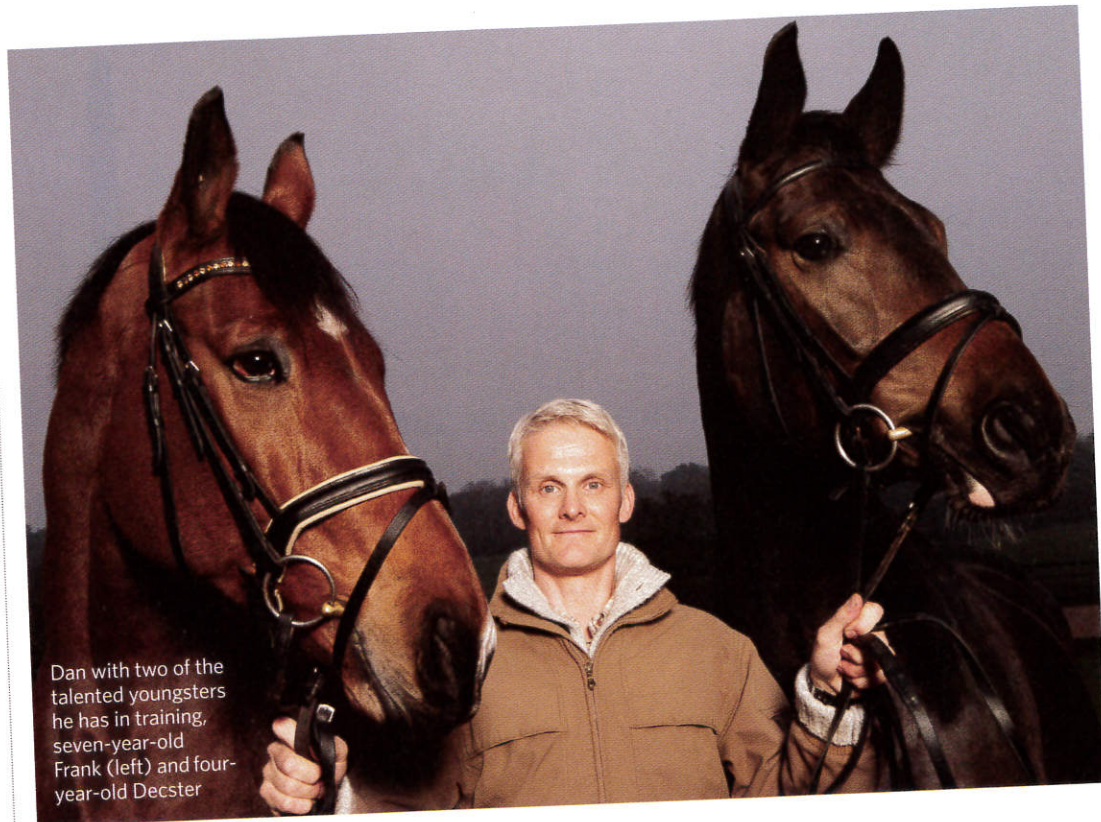
Things started to look up on the horse front, too, as he met his current owner Caroline Portnoi, who has bought him two talented youngsters, Let's be Frank and Santorini, after he gave her some free advice when he saw her struggling while training a horse.

The parents of one his pupils, Malcolm and Rachel Ablett, sent him another youngster and a relation of Lawrence, Dance of Decadence.

Starting from scratch is something Dan is experienced at as he has produced all his horses from youngsters. "I bought Lawrence as a four-year-old through Lisa McAlpine and the deal was done the same day England won the [rugby] World Cup, hence the name. My first grand prix horse, Bayford Hall Boris, was bought as a hunter for my dad for £3,000 as part of a job lot, as was Bayford Hall Cossack, who cost the same and was sold once he reached advanced level to a young rider to raise funds. The only reason I ended up with Boris was because he used to kick out hunting."

Time has also changed Dan in other ways and he is extremely conscious about animal welfare, with all his horses enjoying time out in the 60 acres of post-and-rail paddocks.

"I am passionate about training horses as far as they can go. My first grand prix horse was the easiest to train because ignorance is bliss. I kept going, didn't question and never doubted he could do it. Now I think about whether it is fair to the horse, whether he is able to do this, whether I need to give it another year. If I feel he is not



Dan with two of the talented youngsters he has in training, seven-year-old Frank (left) and four-year-old Decster

coping, would he be better off as a young rider horse?"

That is how he ended up selling his 21st birthday present, Bayford Hall Womble, to Spain. "I thought he would struggle with the grand prix work, but he did compete at that level after I sold him."

**Teaching and competing**

Dan rides five horses in the morning and reserves the afternoons for teaching. "I think it's the perfect number.

There are no medals for riding more – it is not a competition of who can ride the most – and it means I can give a horse an extra 15 minutes if there is the need."

The years have also improved his teaching and his pupils include Claire Gallimore and Aimee Witkin, who have both represented Britain. "I enjoy communicating and am good at translating feel. I have a reputation for being passionate and used to be too

pushy for some people. I can see what a horse and rider are capable of and used to raise my voice to encourage them. Now that I am older and more experienced, I realise that often people ride their horses with the handbrake on because they are frightened of riding them more forward."

Dan finally opens up about his own competition record: "I have won every national title up to prinx st georges level, where I have often been in the line-up, but the title still eludes me. I am a past winner of the intermediate II with Boris and have always been in the top 10 in the grand prix every time I have had a horse at the level."

Despite winning the grand prix special at Hickstead this year and hearing his first national anthem,

he rates last year's Hickstead as his greatest achievement to date. "It's not all about winning. It was Lawrence's fourth grand prix test when we competed in the three-star CDI last year and finished fourth. We ended up qualifying for the five-star competition and finishing seventh. To be in the line-up with Jerich Parzival and Exquis Nadine was amazing.

"My goal is to achieve 70% consistently at grand prix level. People have this image when they come to Bayford that this is a holiday camp. It is not; a great deal of effort goes into producing horses. I am still so passionate about my life with horses that it doesn't feel like hard work. I still get a tingling down my spine when I see dressage performed at its best."

“My first grand prix horse was the easiest to train because ignorance is bliss. I never doubted he could do it”

**Dan's horses**

- **BAYFORD HALL DALLAGLIO** (Lawrence), 13-year-old 16.3hh stallion by Laurentianer, owned by Dan
- **LET'S BE FRANK** (Frank), seven-year-old 18hh bay gelding by Furst Piccolo, owned by Caroline Portnoi
- **SANTORINI**, five-year-old 16.2hh liver chestnut Hanoverian stallion by San Remo, owned by Caroline Portnoi
- **DANCE OF DECADENCE** (Decster), four-year-old 17.1hh gelding by Lauries Crusador, owned by Rachel Ablett