



Father and Son

Newscaster Alastair Stewart is not only an ambassador for British Showjumping, but also father of young rider and horse producer Freddie. Both talk to ANTHONY HAYWARD.

Horse riding holds a very special place in the heart of ITV newscaster Alastair Stewart. "Sally, my wife-to-be, and I used to drive to Burley, in Hampshire, and hack out in the New Forest as part of our courting," says the veteran presenter who brightens up even the most serious news with his colourful shirts and ties.

"Then, when we got married, it was Sally who said, 'I do hope if we're ever lucky enough to have children that they might ride. That would be lovely.' Lo and behold, three out of four did."

In fact, 20-year-old son Freddie is carving out his own career in the equestrian industry as both a rider and producer.

"Freddie is an echo of some of his big heroes, such as Tony Newbery and Peter Charles, who are great riders but also run great businesses," says Alastair, who turns 61 this month. "The only way that you succeed in this sport is to do a bit of all of that."

Alastair's own riding began while attending St Augustine's Abbey School, in Ramsgate, Kent. "I was at boarding school because my dad was in the Air Force and at weekends I sailed and took riding lessons, and absolutely loved it," he recalls.

"Riding was my great escape. When I went to university and got a job, it fell by the wayside, until I met Sally, who'd also ridden horses as a child."

After joining ITN as industrial correspondent in 1980, he was soon presenting news programmes and many predicted that he would be the natural successor when senior newscaster Alastair Burnet retired in 1991.

However, Trevor McDonald landed the top job and Alastair accepted an offer to present the newly launched *London Tonight*. Although he remained with that regional news programme until four years ago, he had returned to the ITN fold in 2003 to anchor live coverage of the Iraq War.

It was not long before he was presenting the news to national audiences again and,

Freddie started riding for horse dealers and producers at the age of 14.



before the 2010 general election, he moderated British television's first party leaders' debate.

Throughout those busy years, Alastair's horse riding had gone by the wayside once more. However, daughter Clemmie, now a teacher, and sons Freddie and Oscar all took it up as a sport, although eldest son Alex, a Metropolitan Police officer, prefers rugby and football. Alastair, Sally and their two youngest sons now live on a farm with stables and 22 acres in rural Hampshire.

Working at ITN strictly Monday to Friday, Alastair sees weekends as family time and sacrosanct. A shared passion means that the Stewart clan have regularly attended equestrian events together as spectators or participants over the years – point-to-point meetings, local shows and, occasionally, racing at Newbury.

"It's a family thing and that's what I particularly love about it," says Alastair, who was made an OBE in 2006 for his services to broadcasting and charity.

Two years ago, he accepted an offer to become an ambassador for British Showjumping, helping to raise the

profile of the sport as the London 2012 Olympics beckoned.

"We attend events and do talks if asked," he explains. "Also, very quietly and discreetly, we try to seek out other friends of the sport who might be rich enough to buy a horse for somebody to ride. There are lots of people who do it and we need more of them."

Alastair's big regret is that the Olympics seem to have had little effect in boosting British equestrianism's long-term fortunes. "Showjumping was utterly phenomenal after a particularly disappointing Beijing," he says. "Dressage did phenomenally well, too.

"There are so many of us engaged in one way or another with this great sport, but we haven't really capitalised upon that Olympic success. When you look at the scale of the people whose livelihoods depend upon a vibrant equine sector, we've got to get our fingers out.

"We need owners here and we need horses to stop going to the Middle East and the United States. The horse that Peter Charles won gold on is now owned by Bruce Springsteen, the pop



Freddie jumps four-year-old Monte Carlos, a horse imported from Holland.

star, for his brilliant daughter. She's a great rider, but the horse should still be here. That's the economics of it."

The economics is what son Freddie is taking on board as he grapples with finding personal success as a rider and building up a business as a producer and dealer. He first sat on a pony as a baby, had lessons from the age of three and developed a love for hunting.

"It was more an entire day of excitement as opposed to just a minute-and-a-half in the ring," he says. "Slightly to my dismay, I bought my first showjumping pony, Dotty, unknowingly as a hunt pony."

"He was an Appaloosa and sold as a broken pony, but he was actually unbroken. I spent the first six months on the floor every single time I rode him. I came very close to giving up."

"Eventually, he just started to come right. At the end of that first year, he began to demonstrate that he was actually a bit of a showjumper and I jumped on pony teams with the British Showjumping Junior Academy. He reached quite a high level and he's now jumping with my little brother, Oscar, who's 15."

Freddie was only 14 himself when he started riding for horse dealers and producers. "I was riding hunt ponies, jumping ponies, eventing ponies, even a couple of young racehorses for an Irish guy," he recalls. "It was all subconsciously building up to where I could eventually move into a top-end professional yard and not look like a complete novice."

When he attended Alton College to take A-levels, Freddie was regularly given time off to pursue what was obviously his intended career. "They were fantastic and gave me all the support I wanted," he says.

Dad interjects: "Given our experience of the education world (eldest son Alex attended the private Winchester College), the state education system eclipsed all expectations. It's much better at that sort of thing than the private schools, which don't quite understand it."

Peter Charles loaned Freddie his first real showjumping horse, Waganini, after seeing

"At boarding school, I took riding lessons and absolutely loved it. Riding was my great escape."

- Alastair Stewart



Alastair takes the chance to ride one of the horses from Northumbria Police's mounted section while filming *Police Camera Action*.

him on a Junior Academy team and spotting a potential talent. By then, the teenager was spending time at rider and trainer Tony Newbery's yard, near Southampton.

Aged 15 and proving a bit of an Alan Sugar, the young entrepreneur bought his first horses to sell. "I quickly realised that you can't make a living just riding a horse - you have to do other things," he explains.

"I remember saying to Tony Newbery once, 'When did you start making money out of horses?' and he said, 'When I stopped riding them.' You then get into dealing, producing and training. My first-ever buy was a 12.2hh pony that I bought for £140 and sold for £500 about three days later."

There followed three more horses, Eyore, Fiona and Urwin, whom Freddie rode himself in Britain and abroad. He also continued to work at Tony Newbery's yard until last year.

"I learned a huge amount, particularly about the business," he says. "I also started to sell horses on my own behalf. In my lunch breaks and after work, I was always on the computer, trying to find new suppliers and customers. I eventually got to a point where I'd get several calls a day asking if I could find horses for people, which ended up being quite profitable."

For the past year, Freddie has been continuing to develop his Bramble Equine business on the family farm, specialising in Warmblood and Irish showjumpers. There are currently 14 horses there, including five of the family's own.

"I import horses from Holland, Germany and Belgium, as well as some from Spain and Portugal," he says. "I'm also building up quite a good client base in the United States."

"Ideally, I'd like to establish it as the place to go to buy horses in the UK, whether from abroad - the Middle East or the States - or customers here. We will supply those horses at the right price - not over-price them."

Away from the television studio, Alastair is an ambassador for British Showjumping while Freddie is only 20 but already building up a business producing horses alongside his own riding.



With the South Downs Blood Hounds, Freddie enjoys the 2013 New Year hunt.

Freddie tailors his own riding ambitions around the financial realities and wants to build up a separate stable of horses that he does not have to sell to keep his business afloat.

"I'm hoping to jump a horse in the Hickstead Speed Derby and have a string strong enough to jump on a couple of the FEI international tours next year," he says.

"My hope is to jump in Dubai because the prize money is far greater, although the cost to get there is also so much greater, so it's no good taking a couple of average horses."

"Ideally, I'd like to compete in the UK, where the travel costs are less. Unfortunately, it's not worth it financially. It costs £5,000 to go to Spain to jump a horse and I could potentially go out there and win £45,000, whereas a few months in the UK would cost me £5,000 and the most I could win is maybe a couple of thousand. I cannot make any profit."

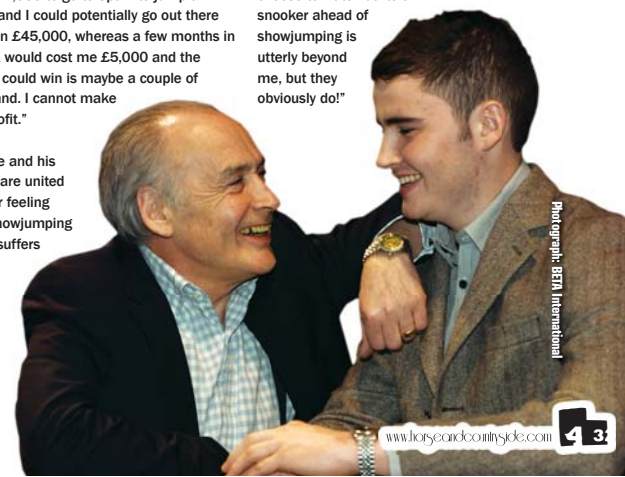
Freddie and his father are united in their feeling that showjumping today suffers

from lack of television coverage - which Alastair finds ironic, considering he is in the broadcasting industry himself.

"I grew up watching Eddie Macken and people like Harvey Smith on telly, and absolutely loved it," he says. "But you have to hunt the needle in the haystack these days to see it and I think it's a great shame."

"Sky does a good job, but Sky has very small audiences. You need to have ITV or the BBC re-discovering the joy of equestrianism and, particularly, showjumping."

"Freddie makes the point that what cost showjumping dearest was probably snooker and darts. There are only so many hours in the day, but how anyone could ever choose to watch darts or snooker ahead of showjumping is utterly beyond me, but they obviously do!"



Photograph: BETH International