

Foresters Juniors at the National Horse Trials Championships, Offchurch 2007

Our Junior Team were:

Rosie Gunnell & Bertie Bassett
Steven Parker & Dakota IV
Sophie Sutton & Evans Above
Carly Woodgate & Blakeney Cowboy

We were so excited at having qualified for Offchurch, Alison Woodgate and I had competed there ourselves before but this was the first time our junior team had qualified, ever, I think. Of course things never run as smoothly as you think, no matter how much planning you do, and four weeks before the event Steven's pony, Dakota had a cough and it was touch and go whether he would be able to go. Fortunately, it wasn't a bad cough and it cleared up in time for the big event but we were a little concerned about his fitness. Then we were required to provide a fence judge in order for the team to compete which wasn't easy given that it was a Friday, in Warwickshire and that everyone with the riders wanted to be with the riders, not stuck on some outpost miles away. Thankfully, ex-committee member, Christa Perry very kindly volunteered and drove all the way to Offchurch on the day in order to help us out. We thanked her over and over again. And then there was the Pony Club Area Dressage which was on the day before the event where Carly was riding Casper (and WON on a score of 79.2%!) so the Woodgates had to hot foot it back from Stratford Hills, swap horses (she took her mum's Blakeley Cowboy to Offchurch – Woody) and drive all the way to Warwickshire! We had fabulous stables and parking for the lorries right next to the XC and after we had settled the ponies (and horse) we all walked the course. As it was a national final, the course was very technical in places and there were tricky direct routes with easy time consuming options. The week previously, Offchurch had been completely flooded with the freak weather and photographs on the secretary's tent were unbelievable. After exercising the ponies round the park, we settled down to eat and Steven headed up the expert BBQ team and we enjoyed a very raucous evening. Of course none of us had anything alcoholic to drink, we were far too responsible and sensible for that.

Friday dawned sunny and bright with a mist over Offchurchbury which was stunning at 5am when Sam and I fed the horses. Obviously, we only fed our horses so the other 200 or so were a bit cheesed off and made quite a lot of noise but we couldn't do much about that. Plaiting and turnout done, Rosie & Steven and Carly & Ali went off to re-walk the XC course then Steven was first on for his dressage. From there on in, all our riders were doing something somewhere and we didn't see much of each other. All four riders put in a solid dressage test, Ro, Steven and Soph jumped clear show jumping, which was very technical and tricky, and Woody just knocked out a pole. Then Steven trailblazed the XC and Dakota was fantastic considering he hadn't been out for so long, they took all the direct routes but unfortunately jumped too big up a step to make the 90 degree turn to a hedge and ended up with a stop and some time penalties. The others took this information on board and decided to circle between the step and the hedge, which you could do as it was numbered separately and both Rosie and Carly jumped lovely clear rounds with just a few time penalties each for going the longer but safe routes. Sophie's Evans was going brilliantly until he missed his stride into a very troublesome coffin and bravely scrambled over the first element, knocking his leg on the way. He was horribly lame and Sophie immediately got off, but thankfully he was fully recovered just a few minutes later. It was disappointing though because we thought she would notch up a very good score but at least he was ok which was, of course, the main thing.

Anyway, at last we could all relax, it was all over. The weather was lovely and we all lazed around eating ice creams and waiting for final scores. Ponies (and horse) were happily in their cool stables and as we watched the scores go up we realised we could be in for a top 10

placing because there were so many eliminations and refusals. We were delighted when we realised we had in fact come 9th as a team and Carly was 6th individually and Rosie was 9th individually in their respective arenas. Our team had to get dressed in their riding clothes for the prize-giving although only the top 3 teams went in mounted - there were endless photographs and prizes and we were very proud to be part of it. Of course, we bought the photos and the T-shirts, and then cleared up all our gear, loaded up our ponies (and horse) and headed back home. It was a lovely couple of days, Offchurch is just the most brilliant place with a fantastic atmosphere and we all said we want to try and qualify again next year. Thanks to everyone for making the big effort, and to our four juniors for being so fantastic.

Alyson Parker
Junior Team Manager & Chef d'Equip!!!