

**ACCESS
ALL
AREAS**
Laura Collett

COVER STORY

**EVENT RIDER
Laura Collett**

Lucy Higginson shadows event rider Laura Collett for a day and finds a small, personal operation in which everything hinges on this petite but determined rider

WHY do we love Laura Collett? Yes, she is sweet, talented and photogenic, but for an eventer with only two horses currently at advanced, her profile is rather higher than her rider ranking.

The answer, I suspect, is twofold. First, she represents a new generation of event riders who appeal to a new generation of horse fans.

She is still only 24, having been hugely successful in juniors and young riders, and is a natural with social media. Some 22,000 Twitter

followers love her snaps of snoozing dogs and “between the ears” views out hacking.

Then there are the headlines: being chosen as Kauto Star’s new custodian, and her horrendous rotational fall at Tweseldown almost exactly a year ago, which frightened everyone rotten and left her permanently blind in one eye.

I went to Windy Hollow in Lambourn, Berkshire, her base since parting ways from her former landlord and owner Philip Walker in November last year, to observe a typical day’s work. In doing so, I discovered that this bouncy little blonde – so neat and petite that she has



8.30am

Laura tacking up (left) and schooling Oratorio II in the outdoor dressage arena (above)

carved a useful sideline producing and schooling eventing ponies – is also incredibly hard-working and brave.

The Collett eventing team comprises more quadrupeds than bipeds. The linchpins are Laura and her mother Tracey, supported by Jimmy Little, who works mornings to muck out, harrow and so on, plus one other full-time groom.

Laura’s great friend and long-standing head groom Felicity Roberts had left a few days before my visit, so deputising in a freelance capacity was Debbie Carpenter, a former head girl to Izzy Taylor.

While Tracey has a cottage on site at Windy Hollow – “It’s handy for doing night checks” – Laura has a place just down the road in Lambourn. But 7.30am breakfast and a morning brew are taken in the yard office. It is adorned with the usual accoutrements – fridge, kettle, computer, recent rosettes, eventing photos and *Horse & Hound* covers on which Laura has appeared.

“This bouncy blonde – so neat and petite she has carved a useful sideline producing and schooling eventing ponies – is also incredibly brave”

Then begins a well-oiled routine, with some horses turned out, while others are prepared for work one or two at a time. Each one is cross-tied in the grooming box for a quick flick off, booting and tacking up, and hoof-oiling.

“It’s a hardener too,” explains Laura, but I wonder if this former showing rider just can’t bear to see a horse anything other than immaculate.

Routines for ‘the babies’

LAURA’S first two today are “the babies”, starting with Oratorio II, aged five, who is by William Fox-Pitt’s advanced horse Oslo (who is now gelded), followed by Ouzo.

“William didn’t want Oratorio because the mother was only 15.2hh,” explains Tracey.

Laura has had the last laugh – the horse is now 16.3hh if he’s an inch.

Laura rides these in a 20x60m dressage arena laid out in a top field. She doesn’t hang about, trotting within 3min.

Renowned as a beautiful rider on the flat, it’s easy to see how Laura lands top-three placings within weeks of starting a young horse’s career.

“Actually, he got a bit scared at his first event,” explains Laura of Oratorio. “He came out of the start box and stopped at the first fence. But he’s been third and fourth since.”

And he’s since won a BE100, too.

Her second ride of the day, another five-year-old who was only backed in December, is also soft and consistent on the flat – and again rather enormous.

“I never measure any of them,” says Laura. “It would probably frighten me if I did.”

Nevertheless, Laura doesn’t put a set of spurs on all day: “I save those for competitions to give me that bit extra – or for the

Regular teas and coffees punctuate Laura and her mother Tracey’s day in the office strewn with photos



The Colletts’ venerable Lab Bilbo, and Zanie King’s terrier Peanut soak up the sunshine



occasional jumping lesson,” she says.

Laura works each youngster for about 25min, incorporating serpentine and leg-yielding and plenty of time off the track.

As she teaches them to begin lengthening, I realise part of the reason she can keep her rides short – besides necessity when she has 10 to do in a day – is the speed with which she gets her message through.

The second horse – Ouzo – breaks into canter a couple of times, but Laura rebukes him gently and he learns within seconds, rather than minutes.

Back at the yard, Debbie relieves Laura of the horse who’s worked, cross-ties it in an archway and washes it off before putting it on the walker to cool off.

Any observations about how a horse has gone are written up in the office diary – and this is a routine that continues all day.

Laura’s third ride of the day is Candy King, a four-year-old by Grafenstolz belonging to Jay Halim, whom he’s asked her to compete in a young event horse class.

She takes it up to have a first look at white dressage boards then gives it a pop in the indoor school, ready instantly with her leg



Just another day at the office: Laura and groom Debbie Carpenter hack out Rayef and Obos Cooley



Pictures by Jon Stroud Media

10am

1pm



Laura schools her novice six-year-old Mr Bass bareback. And schools the four-year-old Candy King (below)



when he baulks the first time he sees her Winnie the Pooh filler.

Ditching the saddle

LATER in the day, she gamely jumps Mr Bass, a bright bay novice – “He’s only six, but a bit of a dude, and safe and comfy enough to jump like this” – bareback for us.

Known to some as the queen of high jump contests, Laura is happy enough to dispense with her saddle over a whopping fence – she once said if she hadn’t been an eventer, she would have liked to have been a jump jockey. But she’d never lose her neckstrap.

“I don’t feel a horse is fully tacked up without one,” she says. “They even go on to warm up for dressage, and sometimes they go back on afterwards

“I don’t feel a horse is fully tacked up without a neckstrap. They even wear one to go to the dressage warm-up”

Laura Collett

to go back to the lorry.”

As you’ll see if you watch our video online, Laura’s position is rock steady as she jumps bareback.

But it’s not just a party piece: “Yogi [Breisner, British Eventing performance manager and Laura’s regular instructor, who teaches her roughly one day a week] has sometimes had me riding bareback in just a headcollar on the four-star horses,” explains Laura.

“They just lob around in canter and it switches them off – they can let go of their whole body. It’s good for their fitness too.”

When it comes to hacking, Debbie rides out with Laura – although there are a few horses that only Laura rides, including Kauto Star (“just because of the responsibility”), Controe (who is sharp as well as talented and spends as much time as possible out in the field), and the grey intermediate Cooley Lord Lux, another leggy-looking horse.

“You’d never get a stick near him, though,” says Laura. “There is a lot he’s scared of. It’s only this year we’ve been able to get on



Laura eats lunch in the tackroom, while checking emails and Twitter

LAURA'S DAILY STAPLES

- French link bits for most of her horses with cheek pieces
- Hoof oil with hardener
- Instant coffee (lots)
- Hose and walker – each horse’s post-ride treatment
- Thin numnah and half-pad

him without lungeing him a lot first.”

Laura has a leg up on to this one instead of using the mounting block.

“For about a month in the winter we just practised getting on and off every day in the indoor school,” she says.

The time comes to exercise Kauto Star and I’m intrigued to see how much more established he has become, especially in canter, since I first saw Laura work him barely two months after he arrived. He’s a horse who oozes star quality and lights up the instant a camera appears – a David Beckham on four legs.

Lunch is eaten in the tackroom, usually while checking emails and Twitter, after six horses have been ridden.

“I get some random ones [emails] sometimes, like, ‘Can I send one of Kauto’s old horse shoes,’” laughs Laura.

Impressively, there have been no biscuit or snack stops between rides.

A compact and personal operation

WITH one horseshoe-shaped set of stables – although there are a handful more in use by the indoor school, where fellow eventer

Access All Areas **Laura Collett's day**



Laura and Debbie, ready to head out hacking



5pm

Horses cool off on the walker after work. Left: Laura walks Kauto Star up to her grass dressage arena

Chris King also keeps his own small string — and a small office/kitchen and tackroom off it, this yard feels compact and personal.

The operation hinges on Laura and her mother — they don't take on working pupils — and they take precious few days off.

"My holidays are going to Cheltenham and Olympia each year," says Laura.

"But you only go for a day to each," protests her mum.

Other smaller branches to her business become apparent after lunch.

There is a smart, leggy iron grey with a great pop who has come from Corfu for Laura to prepare for sale.

"Poor horse, in two months he's been gelded, had his back done, his teeth done — now he needs to learn that nothing hurts any more and it's OK to go forward properly," she says.

Then there is a terrific stamp of Connemara being sharpened up for junior eventing classes, while his regular rider is at boarding school.

LAURA'S DAY IN NUMBERS

- 10** horses ridden a day
- 3** rugs outside each stable
- 8** tweets that day
- 1** neckstrap goes on every horse

Pint-sized Laura could be — and has been — mistaken for a 14-year-old when she gets on a 14.2hh pony. But it means she is well placed to school and produce ponies for clients.

Last year, she helped sell a pony for a client for 10s of thousands of pounds. She has more recently bought a pony of her own to bring on and produce for sale.

"Ponies are where the money is," attests Laura.

the brother of Noble Springbok whom Laura competed in her junior days.

Now blind in one eye, she trained her brain to cope with reduced depth perception by riding him over pole after pole on the ground until she felt ready to tackle fences again.

"I think she realises now she wasn't really well enough to compete again when she did at Wellington [late last August]," says Tracey. "But she still went and won."

Laura decided she wanted to watch the video of her accident — of which she has no memory — to see exactly what happened.

"People told me I hadn't 'missed' at the fence, but I wanted to know if they were just being kind to me," she says.

They weren't — and watching the incident has not affected her nerves at all; it just left her grateful that she is still able to ride.

By the end of the day, I have begun to pick up the pattern and structure of the yard, so start making myself a tiny bit useful.

"You can come and write an article every week," jokes Tracey.

Going to help bring in some of the afternoon horses, I am handed a headcollar and told to bring "that one in. He's absolutely fine but don't let him drag you off to eat".

I duly catch, lead in and rug up the horse in question — and can now proudly say I once put Kauto Star to bed.

At 6.30pm or so, with 10 horses ridden, Laura loads up saddles on the lorry ready to go to Bolesworth International in Cheshire, although show bridles stay permanently on the lorry.

Then it's time to clean the tack used during the day — almost 12hr after I arrived, the trio of women are still finishing off.

Is it any wonder Laura's typical evening consists of getting some food, collapsing on the sofa and falling asleep?

I've seen a typical Collett day in idyllic June sunshine, but I sense the cheerfulness, affection for each equestrian personality and attention to detail permeates this yard's ethos each and every day. Her Twitter followers are right; this young lady is fun and fearless — and one to follow. **H&H**

How a pony helped her recover

IN FACT her first ride when she got back in the saddle after her accident last year was a pony —



6.30pm



Evening, and Laura is loading up the lorry for an outing to Bolesworth International (above and right)