

Foxhunter: a forgotten national hero

Author : Bob Michell

Categories : [General](#), [Vets](#)

Date : June 20, 2016

Once there was a horse called Foxhunter, and he and his rider became the most famous names in the land.



Image: © Wikimedia Commons/Timtrent.

As the Olympic Games in Rio approach, only one nation has won gold at every summer Olympic Games – thanks to Lieutenant Colonel Harry Llewellyn and his beloved Foxhunter. On the final day of the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki, he rode Foxhunter in the team showjumping and, with their final round, they produced the clear round that gave Great Britain its only gold medal.

Not until 2012 did Great Britain win showjumping gold again. Many years later, Lt Col Llewellyn's son also became famous – or rather, infamous – as the prime prey of the red tops, thanks to his association with Princess Margaret. But this is a Welsh story, so we must “begin at the beginning”.

A born horseman

Henry “Harry” Llewellyn was born in Breconshire and, as he said in his autobiography, “through my blood flows the blood of the plough, the pit and the pulpit and it is all Welsh”. He read law and economics at the University of Cambridge, but had inherited his father's love of horses and learned to ride as a child.

Llewellyn began showjumping in his 20s, but his first major successes were in steeplechasing. He won 60 National Hunt races and, in 1936, was runner-up in the Grand National on Ego. In 1937, he came fourth, but would probably have won if a riderless horse had not crossed his path at the last open ditch and nearly brought Ego down.

Llewellyn had nearly sweated blood in his bid to improve on his 1936 result, reducing his weight from 12st to 10st 4lb, including a three-mile run the day before the race wearing an insulated airman's suit over multiple layers of clothing.

The Second World War interrupted Llewellyn's thriving equestrian career and replaced it with a distinguished military one. Commissioned in the Warwickshire Yeomanry, he served with the Anglo-French force that invaded Syria and Lebanon in 1941. Subsequently, he served in North Africa, Italy and Europe, including Normandy following the D-Day landings. He rose to Lieutenant Colonel, became Field Marshal Montgomery's eighth Army senior liaison officer, was twice mentioned in dispatches, and received the US Legion of Merit and an OBE.

The postwar election brought Labour to power and, in 1947, the coal industry was nationalised. Lt Col Llewellyn was forced to realign his priorities – his father had been chairman of the largest colliery in Wales, but any idea of following his path was blocked. It was probably a blessing in disguise because he saw his future in resuming his equestrian career.

Accordingly, he studied the records of every horse registered with the British Showjumping Association (BSJA) and the one that caught his eye was Foxhunter – a bay gelding born on St George's Day that stood 16.3 hands tall and was sired by a Thoroughbred stallion. Lt Col Llewellyn bought him as a six-year-old novice, yet, in the following year, they were in the British showjumping team that won bronze at the 1948 Olympic Games in London.

Foxhunter finished seventh in the individual placings – an astonishing accomplishment for such a young showjumper; destiny beckoned.

Gold and glory

As the Olympic Games in Helsinki drew towards their close, the outlook was bleak. Britain lay eighteenth in the medal table, with eight bronze, two silver and no gold. The headlines belonged to another colonel, the Czech Emil Zatopek, who retained his title at 10,000m, but also added the 5,000m and the marathon, making him arguably the greatest distance runner.

Olympic equestrianism established a footnote in history by allowing women to compete for the first time – but only in dressage. In showjumping, the British team – captained by Lt Col Llewellyn – was fifth after the opening rounds. The first round had been a disaster for him and Foxhunter; they had collected 16.75 faults and Lt Col Llewellyn narrowly avoided being unseated. He blamed himself entirely; he had not warmed up properly in preparation for their round and he was exhausted before

they even began.

He managed an hour's sleep before the second round, warmed up thoroughly with Foxhunter and returned to the fray raring to go. They could only afford to hit one fence if the team was to win. They jumped clear – one of only four clear rounds in the entire competition – and it clinched gold for the team, alongside Douglas Stewart and Wilf White on another famous showjumper, Nizefella. But the clear round, bringing Britain its only gold at the last gasp, ensured Lt Colonel Llewellyn and Foxhunter became national heroes – as famous in their day as Rooney or Ronaldo; Redgrave or Murray.

Foxhunter's career continued successfully until his retirement in 1955 and the pair were always greeted with the warmest of applause. Apart from their Olympic Games successes, they also won the King George V Gold Cup in 1948, 1950 and 1953; the partnership was unique in this triple victory and, in all, they won 78 international competitions.

Foxhunter died in 1959. His grave is on the Blorenge mountain between Abergavenny and Blaenavon, along with his feats recorded on a green memorial plaque, high on the moorland, between two outcrops of grey rocks (pictured). In 2012, the Olympic torch procession passed within sight on its way to London and, at last, another British showjumping victory. His name lives on in the Foxhunter Championship for novice horses at the Horse of the Year Show, contested since 1956.

Another life

When Foxhunter died, Lt Col Llewellyn was 48, with two equestrian careers and a distinguished military career behind him; he did not rest on his laurels. He became a founder director of Television Wales and the West, a justice of the peace and a high sheriff of Monmouthshire. In 1956, he received the Royal Humane Society Bronze Medal for lifesaving and the International Equestrian Federation gold medal in 1962. In 1977, he was knighted for services to Wales.

Inevitably, Lt Col Llewellyn held various high offices in equestrian sport, including in The National Hunt Committee and the Jockey Club. He was notably chef d'equipe of the British equestrian team; chairman – and eventually honourable vice-president – of the British Equestrian Federation from 1976 to 1980; and BSJA president from 1967 to 1969.

From 1971 to 1980, he chaired the Sports Council for Wales, took up farming and established a successful Welsh pony stud. From 1985, he was a World Wide Fund for Nature UK council member and, in 1990, was inducted into the Welsh Sports Hall of Fame. Lt Col Llewellyn died in 1999, having become a CBE and a hereditary baronet. Fittingly, after his cremation, his ashes were scattered close to his beloved Foxhunter.

Epilogue

No BBC Sports Personality of the Year Award existed until 1954. But, had it existed in 1952, Lt Col Llewelyn would never have begrudged the fact the winner would have arrived in a horse box. He knew and acknowledged, in a rich and varied life, the most precious aspect had been the privilege of finding such a supremely talented partner and a genius among showjumpers – the immortal Foxhunter.

So, when in Rio we retain our position as the only nation never to return from a summer Olympic Games without a gold, let's remember it would have become impossible without that *Boy's Own Annual* clear round from Foxhunter and Lt Col Llewellyn.