

What do ODT Master Rose, Mirage D'Elle and Nick Of Thyme all have in common? Answer: they were all placed in the top five in the inaugural CIC3* 8/9YO class at Blenheim Palace in 2009 and went on to record top 20 finishes at CCI4* level last year.

This class, introduced for the first time in 2009 to give young horses on the cusp of top-level Eventing their own age-group championship, has yielded as exciting an array of equine talent as we have seen in a long while.

Take the inaugural winner, Flying Machine. Piggy French's ride, who is owned by Anne Marling, Sue Wilkinson and Belinda Keir, has star quality written all over him. "I knew he was a talented horse when I first sat on him as an eight-year-old," says Piggy, who took over the ride from Frenchman

Leonard Goerens at the beginning of 2009. "Leonard had done a great job with him and he's naturally very good in all three phases"

Once Flying Machine had breezed round his CCI2* at Houghton in the spring of 2009, Piggy decided that Blenheim Palace's CIC3* 8/9YO class would be a suitable autumn target.

"He didn't need to do a CCI3*, but the shorter cross country course we could expect at a CIC3* was a perfect step up," she says. "The cross country asked exactly the right questions to educate and encourage young horses without being too over-taxing or mentally demanding. Flying Machine gave me a great ride and I knew that I had a pretty special horse under me by the time I got back."

The gelding returned to Blenheim as a nine-year-old – this time in the 'grown-up' main CCI3* class – where he finished fourth.

As a 10-year-old this season, Piggy

will be planning Flying Machine's step-up to CCI4* level carefully.

"He wouldn't have been ready for Badminton, so he'll either do another CCI3* in the spring, or perhaps aim for Luhmühlen CCI4* later on in June. We'll wait and see," she says.

Ruth Edge's name is synonymous with producing young horses. The Cumbria rider has dominated the placings in Blenheim's 8/9YO class for the past two years with horses she has produced from scratch. Ruth has no doubt that Phil and Maureen Smith's Nick Of Thyme, who finished fifth in 2009, is top drawer.

"He's felt like a very good horse from the moment I first sat on him as a four-year-old," she says. "As he has progressed up the levels he has made everything feel pretty easy."

When the CIC3* 8/9YOs ran for the first time in 2009, the young horses tackled a shortened version of the main CCI3* track.



Of Class 2009

With the Blenheim Palace Horse Trials' 8 and 9YO class now in its third year, *British Eventing* looks back on the original successes



Mirage D'Elle and Pippa Funnell

ALL PHOTOS: ADAM TOWNEND



Nick Of Thyme and Ruth Edge



Piggy French and Flying Machine

“The CIC3 8/9YO class has not only already produced a mouth-watering array of equine talent, but has allowed riders and owners to pitch their future stars against others”*

"It was a tough enough track for young horses in that first year," says Ruth. "Last year this class had almost a completely separate track that was quite a bit softer."

But, Ruth points out, this competition is not only about testing horses across the country, it is about exposing these future stars to the sort of atmosphere they are likely to encounter when they climb the ladder even higher.

"Having to cope with the added distractions of the crowds and all the paraphernalia that comes with a big Event is invaluable education for young horses," says Ruth. "Plus, from an owner's perspective, it is great that there is something so prestigious to aim for with the younger horses. Blenheim's hospitality is second to none; the members' tent is in a prime position and everything is laid on."

Having showed his potential as an eight-year-old at Blenheim, Nick Of Thyme went on to finish 19th at Badminton. He was the only nine-year-old in the field.

"The plan this year is a quiet spring followed by either Burghley or Pau in the autumn," explains Ruth, whose other rising star, Sir David and Lady Frances Hart's Applejack II, finished fourth at last year's Event having led the dressage and showjumping.

"He's another horse for whom I have very high hopes," she says. "He just missed out on time penalties across country at Blenheim, but the competition itself was a great experience for him."

Ruth plans to take the, now, nine-year-old to Fontainebleau CIC2* in March followed by Tattersalls CCI3* in May.

While Piggy and Ruth both tipped their young horses for the top a few strides after they had swung their legs over the saddle, Pippa Funnell's first impressions of her 2009 Blenheim CIC3* 8/9YO fourth-placed mount, Mirage D'Elle, were less positive.

"When I got him, I said to Carol Toliver [owner] that I didn't think he was the horse for me. He wouldn't even walk down the road in a straight line and he stuck his head up like a plane-spotter," says Pippa. "He's the strangest horse, who goes in his own way, but he's a very bold and honest jumper and puts it all together when it matters."

Mirage D'Elle nevertheless rose up the ranks quickly, going from BE100 to CCI4* in just four seasons. He went on to finish 15th at Burghley in 2010.

"It's very exciting to have a young horse like him coming through," Pippa commented in 2009 after the gelding's four-star debut.

Just two years down the line, and the CIC3* 8/9YO class has not only already produced a mouth-watering array of equine talent, but it has allowed riders and owners to pitch their future stars against others in the same age group.

"Events of this calibre are a real asset to the sport," says Ruth.

So, for anyone who wants to see how future stars are made, visit Blenheim Palace from 8-11 September. ✦

Tickets can be booked at a discount through www.blenheim-horse.co.uk

8 and 9 year-old CIC3* schedule

Dressage – Thursday & Friday
Churchill Arena situated within the Members' Car Park

Showjumping – Saturday approx 4-6pm
Main Marlborough Arena (after the CCI3* cross country has finished)
NB tickets for grandstand seats ARE required this year.

Cross country – Sunday approx 9.45-12.30
NB Make sure you buy a Saturday inclusive ticket in order to get a grandstand seat – only an extra £3 over admission only!

The class of 2009

The inaugural CIC3* 8/9YO class took place in 2009. What did the top six go on to achieve last year?

1. Flying Machine (Piggy French) – went on to finish sixth in the CIC3* at Hartpury and fourth in the CCI3* at Blenheim in 2010.
2. Avebury (Andrew Nicholson) – finished second at Hartpury CIC3* in 2010 before going on to be 22nd at Burghley. Without an unlucky run-out across country he would have been in the top five.
3. ODT Master Rose (Oliver Townend) – went straight on from Blenheim to finish fifth at Boekelo CCI3* in 2009. Finished last season with a 13th place at Pau CCI4*.
4. Mirage D'Elle (Pippa Funnell) – some great results last year including seventh at Saumur CCI3* and 15th at Burghley.
5. Nick Of Thyme (Ruth Edge) – the only nine-year-old at Badminton, where he finished 19th.
6. Take It To The Limit (Jeanette Brakewell) – finished 17th at Boekelo in 2009 and improved on this at Birmham last year, where he finished sixth.



Right: Avebury and Andrew Nicholson
Below: Take It To The Limit and Jeanette Brakewell
Below right: ODT Master Rose and Oliver Townend



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