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November 20, 2012

A Candid Conversation With Clayton Fredericks, The New Canadian Eventing Coach

By: Karen Briggs



Clayton Fredericks is looking forward to seeing how he can help guide Canadian eventers to success. Photo by Sara Lieser

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The Australian eventer is steering his star-studded career in a new direction by taking on the technical advisor role for the Canadian eventing team, which was recently vacated by David O'Connor. While attending Toronto's Royal Winter Fair in early November, Clayton Fredericks sat down for a chat.

By now the news is out: Australian Clayton Fredericks, winner of an Olympic team silver medal at the 2008 Olympic Games in Hong Kong, individual silver and team bronze medalist at the 2006 FEI World Equestrian Games (Germany), and 2007 Rolex Kentucky CCI**** champion, has been named the Canadian eventing team's new technical advisor. He'll take the reins in January

2013 as David O'Connor ends a spectacularly successful stint in the same role and moves on to coach the U.S. team.

Fredericks, 44, was reportedly one of several stellar international candidates applying for the position. His recent relocation to Ocala, Fla., from Great Britain is a plus for the Canadians, who are spread across North America but converge on the southern United States in the winter months.

Fredericks previously coached the Hong Kong equestrian team to a fourth-placed finish at the 2002 Asian Games, and China's only international eventing star, Alex Hua Tian, is one of his more successful clients.

Fredericks made an appearance at Toronto's Royal Agricultural Winter Fair to take part in the Indoor Eventing class on a borrowed horse. It proved an ideal time to get his thoughts about taking on the Canadian squad.

Q: How did your appointment as Canadian Team Advisor happen?

Fredericks: I was doing a clinic in California, and we were talking, in the evening, about the U.S. team's nominations [for new coaches, on the retirement of Capt. Mark Phillips]. Hawley Bennett asked me if I would consider taking on coaching the Canadian team when David O'Connor left, and it wasn't really something I was thinking about at that time, but I'd had a few drinks that evening and I said, "Yeah, that'd be great, why not?"

There's a time in everyone's career when they start thinking of the next steps. So it started

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there, and then [Canadian Chef d'Equipe and incoming chair of the Canadian High Performance Committee] Graeme Thom contacted me and gave me a little more information about what it's all about. He asked whether I would really be interested, and I said I'd have to think seriously about my own riding career, because really, you can't do both together.

I said to him I'd still like to apply, and I went through the process and here I am.

Q: Had you already made the decision to move to Florida at that point?

Fredericks: Yes, we'd been looking at doing something in the United States anyway, mainly with my other business that I'm in with my brother, Southern Stars Saddlery. We want to really crank that side of things up in the United States. And I was a bit fed up with British weather! I've been 19 years in the United Kingdom, and this last year there was no incentive [to stay] really after all the cancellations of the events [due to widespread flooding]. So I thought it would be a good opportunity. We visited a few times, and really I was looking to invest in some property, but then I got introduced to Chuck and Anne Koch, who own the property I'm now leasing, Oak Lane Farm, which was a polo club at one stage.

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I'm leasing 150 acres, and there are 700 acres of estate there so there's plenty of scope to have a competition. As I talked more with the guys who are out there, they all indicated that another competition [near Ocala] would be brilliant. It's got some undulation, it's not dead flat, so I think it'd be great for a good course. The ground's very good.

To start with, I want to set it up as a venue for competitions and for training, and I'm still going to do the horse sales—I have really good contacts in Europe, and all the horses I've produced through to four-star level have been produced from young horses. So I still want to do that business, producing horses for sale. I've

got another five or six horses arriving in January.

Q: Is your wife, Lucinda, going to continue to compete while you concentrate on coaching and sales?

Fredericks: Yes, Lucinda is still full-on competing. If anything she's *more* busy now than she ever was. It's always difficult with two riders fighting it out between each other, and it's even more difficult when you're actually married to each other! She's going to continue to run the place in England, at least while [daughter] Ellie is in school, and I'll be doing what we're doing in Florida and going back and forth as much as I can.

Q: How much of a time commitment will you have with the Canadians?

Fredericks: Essentially until the next Olympic Games. It's a fair old commitment!

I'm trying not to put all my normal activities off completely. I've got clinics scheduled in Texas and California, and I'm going to be teaching at the new place in Florida. And I'm still going to be going back to Germany, but time is going to be tight. I thought I was busy before! Hopefully the frequent flyer miles will pile up, and I'll have a chance at flying business class instead of cattle class.

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Q: How well do you know the Canadian riders?

Fredericks: It's been great to be here [at the Royal Winter Fair] because it's been an opportunity to get to know some of the riders. When I've been competing myself, I've really been focused on what I'm doing. I've never been one to know what everyone else does. The hardest part of the job is now I've got to really learn some new faces, learn what horses they've got, and try to understand some of the problems the Canadian team faces with producing [combinations] to the top level.

I know one of the challenges is distance, and to some extent I have experience with that, because being Australian, we have our riders spread all over the world. At one stage we had riders in the States, in Europe and in Australia as well, and it's difficult. I hope I can use that experience to address some of the problems as far as having riders spread all over the place. [The Canadians] have almost got it worse than what we had, because now they've got three riders in the United Kingdom, they've got riders here in Ontario, some in Florida, some in California and some in British Columbia, so there are four or five areas where everyone is. They really are spread all over.

There are pros and cons to that. It does allow for them to draw support teams and people from a wide area—I mean they're not all here in Toronto competing for the same owners and the same sponsors. I think that's something that we need to really promote. And we need to start getting good young horses with potential for the top level.

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Q: One of our other perpetual challenges is funding. Were there discussions, when you took this on, about the likely level of financial assistance?

Clayton: Yeah, obviously that's always relative to the performance. Unless you're doing well, you're not getting the government support, so it's a little bit chicken and egg. The 2010 result at the Alltech FEI World Equestrian Games [where Canada was the team silver medalist] is a good basis and a good start, and we've got to try to build on that. The London Olympics was a bit of a set-back from that. [Only one of Canada's riders was able to complete.]

Funding's not an easy issue for any country.

With the exception of possibly the British team, who've got lottery funding, and because it's more their national sport they've got an 'owner culture,' it can be difficult. But I think it's exciting that Canada has really good up-and-coming young riders who need a little bit of mentoring, and there's some good experience in the team too. We just need horsepower, like anyone. We can't do it without that.

If people want to help, that's how they can do it, by getting good horses under our riders.

Q: What's the first thing you're going to do when you officially start as the Canadian team advisor in January?

Fredericks: We're a little bit lucky because we don't have to hit the ground running. We don't have a championship [in 2013], so we've got a little time to get prepared. My first priority will be learning and understanding what the riders have and have not liked in the past; what's worked and what hasn't worked. David O'Connor has laid a good foundation, so I just have to pick up from there. I hope I can make some interesting tweaks to what's been done in the past and give us a bit more of an edge.

Q: Have you consulted with David, or are you planning to?

Fredericks: I've had a couple of conversations with David, and I'm going to have another long conversation with him at some stage when we can finally get the two of us in the same place at the same time. The thing I can bring is a completely fresh set of eyes. I'm coming into this job with absolutely no pre-conceived ideas; I don't know the riders well enough to have formed any

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pre-conceived ideas. I think it's an advantage. They're all going to get a fair and equal chance with me. We've been building some relationships this week, and I don't want anyone to feel excluded from the program in any way.

We need to develop a situation where everyone's got good communication with me, and that's really their responsibility. They need to be telling me what's going on.

Q: Was the Royal Winter Fair invitation [to compete in the Indoor Eventing class] part of the master plan?

Fredericks: No, that was just a coincidence. But it's really good, both in terms of getting to know the riders, and for some of the officials and other people who are involved heavily in Canadian eventing and Canadian equestrian sports, to see in person the guy they've chosen.

Q: Tell us about your previous experience working as a team coach for Hong Kong.

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Fredericks: Yes, that was leading up to the 2002 Asian Games, and I was responsible for finding them horses, for the whole thing really. Typically for the Asian federations, they only decide to do it 12 months out, and everything has to fall into place very, very quickly. We finished fourth, so that was respectable, and it qualified them for the Olympics Games. These were riders who hadn't competed above novice prior to that. If there's money, then it can be done.

Q: Now you're in it for the long haul with a nation that has some very experienced riders.

Fredericks: This is definitely a step up, but I can't see a problem with it. You never know if

it's the right time, really. All you can do is take opportunities that are presented to you. I don't feel like I'm actually retiring from competition. I've given a commitment that my focus is going to be on the Canadian team.

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