

New beginnings

The new director of Badminton Horse Trials on starting at the bottom

JANE TUCKWELL'S first job interview was at the age of 18, in the hunting field, when Col Frank Weldon, the fairly imperious director of Badminton Horse Trials, 'rode round and round me and said "Well, young lady, I hear you didn't do a bad job helping with the Pony Club championships. You'd better come to work for me".'

Not many people wait 45 years for another interview, but that is what happened to Mrs Tuckwell when Col Weldon's successor, Hugh Thomas, surprised the eventing world by announcing his retirement (after 30 years), on the Monday after this year's event in May, and she was subsequently invited into Badminton House to talk to the Duke and Duchess of Beaufort. 'I'd never been frightened of walking in there before, but I was then,' she confesses.

'I definitely thought, do I really want to do this? But there aren't many chances to go in at the bottom—I mean, I used to go puce if Col Weldon even spoke to me—and come out at the top. I've been bowled over by the support I've received.'

Directing Badminton, the world's oldest, richest and most famous horse trials, a major sporting event in its own right with about 160,000 plus visitors, is considered the plum job in equestrianism—Mr Thomas often said 'I'm a lucky chap'—and speculation about his successor was rife.

In truth, no one else was in the running. The announcement that Badminton was to have its first female director in 70 years, and that it was to be the modest, discreet woman who, for decades, has calmed and charmed riders, volunteers and tradestand holders behind the scenes, has been extremely popular.

'Aren't I lucky?' Mrs Tuckwell says. 'I'm one of those seriously lucky people. I don't know where home ends and work begins.' This is a reference to the fact

that she lives in her family house —'I sleep where I was born'—near Tetbury. Her father, Maj Gerald Gundry, was joint-master of the Duke of Beaufort's hounds from 1951 to 1985, Lt-Col Gordon Cox Cox, Badminton's second director, was a family friend and the wife of the assistant director, Babe Moseley, was her godmother. Badminton is home territory.

Unlike many other venerable institutions, the horse trials keeps its box office in-house and thus treats spectators with a kindly personal touch, remembering names and special preferences from year to year and decade to decade. It's also a source of local pride—nearly all volunteers, the fence judges, Pony Club runners and bowler-hatted stewards, are from nearby—as well as income, bringing trade to pubs, B&Bs, shops, caterers and garages.

'It's important to worry about everyone,' says Mrs Tuckwell. 'I am lucky to have had the influence of my father; he had an incredible love of people and I hope it has rubbed off on me.'

'The important thing is not to lose the character of the event,' she adds. 'I can tell there's a slight worry. People are thinking "What might she dream up?". But what

I've learned—and I've had two amazing teachers—is that you mustn't stand still. The thing that has carried me through is Col Weldon's mantra "just because something has worked for 20 years, doesn't mean it will work for 21". There is a real need for us to evolve.'

‘Nothing is going to go right all the time, but you must feel you've done your best’

The day before my visit, she and new commercial director Andrew Tucker, son of the late BBC commentator Mike Tucker, whose grandfather was a tenant farmer at Badminton—another piece of local continuity—had been on an observatory trip to Countryfile Live as part of their research into improving Badminton's carbon footprint: 'We definitely want to evolve the sustainability—better recycling, water points and so on; it's something we feel strongly about as a team.'

There will be a look at traffic also, after inexplicably bad Saturday jams this year: 'Things sometimes have to go a little bit wrong to make people realise that we have to revisit.' There's potential for re-branding, too, as Mitsubishi Motors has stepped down after 28 years as headline sponsor.

A Friday morning in August isn't usually the most happening time for a sporting event that's nine months away, but there's palpable excitement; Mrs Tuckwell is clearly determined to put her stamp on it. 'It's an exciting time for a new title sponsor and major partners to come on board. A change such as this makes people look at things and rejuvenate them.'

'People ask me if I get bored, but each event has its own story, each one starts with a blank tapestry.' Her most notable winners, she says, are Lucinda Green, victorious six times ('We won't see anyone like that again'), Mark Todd in 1994 on a horse he'd never sat on before and, in 2017, Andrew Nicholson, after 33 years of trying and a broken neck ('My ultimate winner'). 'There's always a twist and, afterwards, you think "Of course". Piggy [French] this year was magic.'

Mrs Tuckwell feels that being a rider and around horses—her husband, Philip, is a renowned trainer and producer of show-jumpers—helps her understand the competitor's state of mind. 'I live with a competitor, I know the feeling of disappointment, the devastation when your horse is lame. Having to cancel is the flattest, most awful feeling, but it's worst for the rider for whom this was their one chance.'

She concedes that, on May 6, 2020, she will be nervous: 'If you stop getting the adrenalin, there's something wrong. Nothing is going to go right all the time, but you must feel you've done your best and you must learn. Nothing can stand still,' she repeats firmly. There seems no danger of that. 🐾

Kate Green

On the record

Badminton Horse Trials, May 6–10, 2020 (www.badminton-horse.co.uk)

Where is your favourite place in Britain? The Badminton estate, where I've had the most fun and reward in my life, and the Scottish Highlands

What is your favourite building? Tetbury church

Book? Santa Montefiore is an author I really like

Music? I listen to Håken Hardenberger playing trumpet concertos in the car

Day off? A walk with my dog, Missy (right, a Lancashire heeler), or a ride on my horse, Paddy—anything away from computers

Holiday? Friends took me and my daughter Melissa to their 'beach hut' at Martha's Vineyard—paradise

Alternative career? I've always had a hankering to be a nurse

Who are your heroes? David Beaufort (the 11th Duke) and Jane Rook, a major figure in the horse-trials world. I didn't have any parents by the time I got married and she was so good to me



Photographed by Mark Williamson at the Badminton Estate