

Hands-on healing

AFTER A LOT OF HARD WORK, KIWI VET PHYSIO SARAH CRUICKSHANK HAS A CAREER THAT HAS TAKEN HER AROUND THE WORLD, AS **SALLY REID** DISCOVERS

Over the past two years, Aucklander Sarah Cruickshank has worked with some of the world's top horses and riders, rubbed shoulders with royalty and played a backstage role at 2008 Olympics. Sarah's passport to privilege is a Master's degree in veterinary physiotherapy, a qualification held by no other New Zealander, and one which took her eight years' hard work and much perseverance to achieve.

Sarah gained her degree at the Royal Veterinary College of London, and returned home late last year after practising in England. Her client list included leading eventers Andrew and Bettina Hoy, Italian and Japanese Olympians, and a camel-racing Dubai sheik.

Her interest in the benefits of physio on horses was kindled by the work of Pukekohe equine sports therapist Claire McGowan 15 years ago. Sarah, 13 at the time and a member of Auckland's Meadowbank Pony Club, had just acquired her first real competition prospect, an Anglo-Arab called Bolero. Soon after his arrival, Bolero's back became sore; vets prescribed six weeks' rest and 'bute, but with Claire's help he returned to work after a fortnight.

Impressed, Sarah thought horse physio would be a really interesting career. While making the decision was easy, finding a way to achieve her goal was the hard part. Veterinary physiotherapy is still in comparative infancy worldwide, and tracking down a degree course took a lot of determination.

"All the way through school I still had no idea how to become a horse physio, so I was aiming to do veterinary science, and I thought I could specialise in horse physio afterwards."

However, after starting university in 1999,

she discovered that the Royal Veterinary College of London was offering a Master's degree in veterinary physio for the first time the following year – but she first had to get a human physiotherapy degree and have a couple of years' experience under her belt.

Undaunted, Sarah switched courses and launched herself into the four-year human physio degree, acquired the requisite work experience, and was finally accepted by the Royal Veterinary College.

The London course was a two-year one; Sarah graduated (topping the class) in 2007 and has been putting her skills to good use ever since.

Rubbing shoulders with royalty

While working freelance in the UK, she added Andrew and Bettina Hoy to her client list. The Hoys were then based at Gatcombe Park, where Sarah, arriving for her first morning's work, almost ran over one of Princess Anne's dogs and, not recognising royalty beneath the riding helmet, failed to address her correctly. "I called out 'Hi', but one of the grooms said, 'You're meant to say, 'Good morning, Ma'am!'" she laughs.

Although Sarah saw the princess "quite a lot" during her time at Gatcombe, she says, "I got a bit tongue-tied after that."

Sarah was at Gatcombe each week to work on Andrew and Bettina's star-studded team, which totalled more than 20 including youngsters.

Inevitably, as she worked with the Hoys' horses, one became her favourite. "Ringwood Cockatoo is just an amazing horse. He's quite aloof but he's very obliging. He's incredible to assess: at 17 he has the body of a much younger horse.

"He came back after the injury which



Top: Sarah works on a grateful client

Above: Sarah (left) with Australian physio Narelle Studds and China team physio Elle Tisch in the Olympic stables at Hong Kong

Right: Sarah with Max, a retired racing camel

A case history:

Sarah's work has been continually rewarding, but some jobs stand out, such as the case of a promising young UK racehorse, Midships. "He was a beautiful thoroughbred colt," she says. "He was bucking; he was tossing his head; he was running to the side and very, very uncomfortable in his work. No-one wanted to handle him; all the lads would walk in there with an extra lead-rope and extra gear just to do anything with him.

"He had quite a significant poll problem, so we got that right and I changed the way they were handling him, and the equipment they were using on him, because they were getting heavier and heavier, trying to control him. We ended up going straight back to a normal headcollar with a gel-pad or a fleece across the headpiece, changing the headpiece on the bridle, getting the lads to do exercises on him every day, some massage and putting some liniment on. He made a really amazing improvement and went back to being a successful racehorse who's now gone to the US to race, so that was very rewarding." Midships has had wins and placings at Newmarket and Ascot, and, soon after his move to the US, ran third in the Hollywood Derby. His racing career continues.



ruled him out of the Olympics, and won the four-star at Pau, which was amazing. I think Bettina's aiming to do the European Champs on him this year – depending on how everything goes – and the last time I spoke to her he was going well.”

Italian event rider Vittoria Panizzon was another client, and the two became good friends, sharing a cottage in Hampshire.

Vittoria's bossy little eventer, the 15.2hh Rock Model ('Bug'), is another of Sarah's favourite equines. She accompanied the pair to last year's Olympics as their personal physio and, once there, was inveigled by other Italian team members to treat their horses too. She also worked on Gorgeous George for Japanese rider Yoshi Oiwa, and was so busy as a result she had little time to see much of the competition.

Sarah enjoys working on elite performance horses immensely. “You have to work

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within their routine, and obviously, if you've got a horse that's competing next weekend, you have to make them feel a lot better without doing anything that means they have to have time off. So it's like really fine-tuning. I really like that – the night after cross-country, trying to get the horse as physically able for the show-jumping as possible.

However, her favourite physio challenge is one in which vets have come to a dead end in terms of treatment: "A horse that other people have written off."

Dogs and other animals

Although she concentrates on horses, Sarah has worked with other animals. "I enjoy the variety. In the UK I saw a rabbit that had been squashed; I did see a couple of cats, but I prefer to do dogs and horses. And I did my thesis on racing camels in Dubai."

After horses, she likes dogs best. "I've had some good success with some of my canine cases, a lot of spinal injuries, a lot of disc problems, a lot of stifle injuries, some quite rare and unusual diseases, where we've kept them going a bit longer after the vet's given them a hopeless prognosis. It's very rewarding, and it's nice to see the owner happy to have their animal in less pain or functional. With a dog it's a bit easier to get them back to a level of function, because we don't ride them, whereas with horses, unless it's a pad-

dock-mate, we expect a lot of them."

She has also developed a fondness for camels. "They're very interesting. The retired racing camels were just gorgeous; really friendly and loved having cuddles and scratches!"

Late last year, Sarah returned to New Zealand; a departure forced on her by Britain's immigration laws. She is still in touch with the Hoys, Vittoria and other UK clients, and says it was "so sad" to leave, but is beginning to build up her business here.

She is also investigating the possibilities of a veterinary physiotherapy Masters' course in New Zealand (see panel below). She has clients across the Auckland area, has worked in Cambridge on the sales yearlings, and is happy to travel to wherever a horse needs physio.

She is also hoping to establish a weekly horse-and-rider clinic: "Where your horse can come and have a once-over, and you can get yourself sorted out as well."

Sarah still owns Bolero, the Anglo-Arab who started her career rolling, and Rasmus, her mother Gaye's Dutch warmblood. Bolero, now 27, was looked after by Sarah's mother while she was in the UK, and Rasmus boarded with his South Island breeder, Susie Stubbs. Both are now back with Sarah, and she hopes to again compete Rasmus in dressage and show jumping, perhaps next season. **H&P**

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What is a vet physio?

A fully qualified human physiotherapist with a post-graduate degree in the veterinary application of these skills: two years of intensive study into animal physiology, anatomy and more. Students are taught by the vet lecturers, but do not study internal medicine. However, they do learn orthopaedics, neurology, exercise physiology, anatomy and physiology. The training is not currently available in this country.

Why opt for a vet physio?

"Probably one of the key strengths of having a qualified vet physio is that we spend a lot of time on our assessment. We do a full assessment, take a full history, look at the horse walking, trotting, on the lunge, turning tight circles, backing up. And ridden, if it's a ridden problem. I'll spend sometimes up to an hour assessing, because a horse can't tell you they've got pain in their hip or their back, and if you don't assess them properly, you can't treat them properly."

"We build up a complete picture of what the problem is, so we can really get to the bottom of it, rather than going, 'Oh, this muscle's a bit sore, we'll treat that' – because that muscle might be sore because the rider is quite hand-

dominant. And that's the other good thing about vet physio: we're trained in humans, so we can look at the rider as well."

Vet physio in New Zealand

Sarah is the only New Zealander qualified as a vet physio, but knows there are some English graduates here too. She is now investigating the possibility of a New Zealand vet physio course, and has been speaking to a European post-graduate vet studies group about the idea. "They're quite interested in beginning something over here, and would like me to help them," she says. The course would almost certainly be for qualified human physiotherapists who wished to learn how to apply their skills to animals.

With guest lecturers from the UK already showing interest, Sarah is looking into local demand for the course. And, working through the New Zealand Society of Physiotherapy, she has formed a special interest group of qualified and student human physios considering a future in veterinary physiotherapy.

If you are interested, visit Sarah's website (www.vetphysio.co.nz) or contact her by email: secruikshank@gmail.com. (Note: the website is new, and may not be 'live' by the time of publication.)