

Workhorse!

Kevin McNab is no stranger to hard toil. He built his Queensland yard from scratch but gave it all up last year for a chance to join the British circuit. AIMI CLARK meets the grafter who is on a mission to succeed at next month's Burghley

“EVERY day there would be something that needed doing. There were horses to ride, fences to build, water pipes to lay, shelters to put up. The list was endless and it's still ongoing.”

Welcome to the world of Kevin McNab, the 35-year-old Australian who does not waste a single second and whose boyish good looks have been saved from weathering by a penchant for wearing hats. Thank goodness. Today he dons a navy baseball cap to protect him from the sun.

When he wasn't on a horse at Kelecyn, the bare plot of land he bought in 2002 and slowly transformed into an enviable eventing set up, he was working. Sleeping hours were wasted hours. But he yearned to make his name as a top rider among the best in the business and it is this drive that prompted him to walk away from Kelecyn 11 years later. Destination England with three horses in tow to join his girlfriend, Emma Dougall, who had relocated in February.

“I do like to be busy. That probably doesn't make me a very good boyfriend because I don't have any spare time,” says Kevin in between sips of tea and bites of fruitcake. “I've always been motivated to do things. I've never thought about why, I just am.”



Kevin with Frances Stead's Burghley-bound Clifton Pinot – ‘He's a cool customer. Burghley is big but that will suit him and his show jumping has improved as we've gelled as a partnership’

We have escaped the blistering July sunshine and sit at the kitchen table in the light and airy two-bed bungalow he and ‘Em’ moved into four months ago. Until then the couple lived in a horsebox on John and Chloe Perry's Bracknell yard. It is from here that they campaign 12 horses.

“We're still getting used to having all this space,” says Kevin with a smile.

There are still some finishing touches to be done. The neutral coloured walls are bare; most of the white-fronted kitchen units are half empty and there are no signs of the couple's horsey links bar a collection of boots and shoes scattered inside the front door.

“I don't do ribbons but we'll put pictures up when we do something good. At first we didn't even have any furniture.”

So that's why we are eating small pieces of cake off large dinner plates.

Kevin is personable and likeable

and popular on the circuit. He talks to people he barely knows as though he has known them for years. His smile never fades, especially when he talks about Kelecyn, sited at the base of beautiful Tamborine Mountain in south east Queensland.

“We bought 50 acres of bare grass with two outbuildings in need of some TLC.”

There was no electricity, no water, no fencing, no stables. Nothing.

“To start with we were bucketing water from a creek to all the horses.”

But Kevin had a vision and to turn it into reality he invited his whole family to rock up. His older brother Ricky, an electrician, older sister Fiona, a physiotherapist who patched everyone up when they broke, and younger sibling Dale, a fitter and turner, plus two uncles — builder Noel and Les, also a fitter and turner — provided the skills.

“It's amazing how much everything costs. We laid all of the water pipes and electricity cables which took months but it meant that all the electricity board had to do was come along and link us up.”

Parents Len and Cynthia, who have always been a driving force behind Kevin, insisted on travelling several hundred kilometres from their herb farm in north Queensland, where



Kevin with fellow eventer and girlfriend of four years, Emma Dougall

they raised their four children, to supplement the workforce.

"They are hard grafters. My whole family is. There was always picking or fertilising to do at home. No one else is horsey, though. I asked for my first pony when I was two and my parents were silly enough to get me one," smiles Kevin whose early days were spent teaching himself to ride using an old jockey saddle passed on from a family friend. "Mum has a picture of me wearing a bike helmet, gumboots, shorts and a school shirt using a potato sack for a saddlecloth."

Kevin never wastes a penny. He even handstitched the beige breeches he is wearing today so that "they last a bit longer. I don't have money to throw away so I don't".

He brings this same frugal approach to his time keeping. It helped to split Kelecyn into 30 paddocks and build a cross-country course, while a 25x65m surface, an 80x55m show jumping ring and a grass arena all slowly materialised, as well as stable blocks, tackrooms and washing areas.

"It's possible to break in a horse and give it a complete education so that it goes to its first competition without having left home," he says.

So how does it feel to return to renting? He pauses.

"I quite like it. I can focus on my riding and this is the first time I've been able to do that. I don't want to worry about maintenance and upkeep. I built Kelecyn from scratch and I enjoy having my own property. It took a long time to build up and walking away was getting harder the longer I stayed."

Kevin's business was nearly crushed, though, when an outbreak of influenza in August 2007 brought the country's equine industry to a standstill. He left Warwick Horse Trials minus his horses due to movement restrictions and invested in a hammock.

"I sat in it for a couple of days making a plan. Option one was to get a day job but I decided I would still go broke because it wouldn't cover the expense of keeping horses. So I plunged myself more into debt by investing in earthmoving machinery and I set to work

I built Kelecyn from scratch and walking away was getting harder the longer I stayed'

Kevin McNab

reshaping the farm over four months. 'Dozers, dumpers — you name it, we had it — and we had a lot of fun. It gave me a shove in the right direction.'

Financially, however, it was tough. Nothing could enter or leave the yard which had always relied on training and buying and selling to stay afloat.

"A lot of sales were set up and they all collapsed in one hit. I didn't make one dollar out of horses for six months. The government

provided relief payments, which ensured that the horses were fed, but my staff worked for nothing. Quite a few yards went under and several changed direction. I don't think the market has ever fully recovered."

In earlier years academia never featured large in Kevin's life.

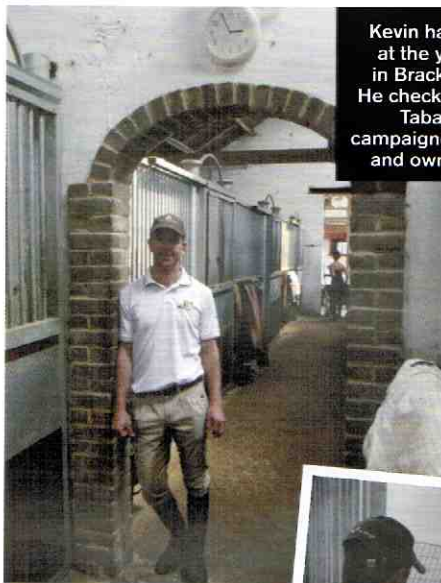
"There was never any chance of me going to university," he says matter of factly. "I moved to Brisbane for my final two years of school and I had four horses preparing for three-day events while I was in my last year. That didn't leave a lot of time for studying."

His grisly determination paid off and after a year spent as a working pupil to Tony Manca in New South Wales, Kevin followed that with six months at Heath Ryan's and the next three years in the Hunter Valley. Then came his return to Queensland and an 18-month stint living with friends, Victor and Natalie Nichols, and using their 25 acres to its full potential before he set up on his own.

With a reputation growing by the week he received a request to coach his state's junior squad. People travel for miles to train with Kevin, the man renowned for having a good eye for a horse and a knack for producing classy riders.

"I get very involved in my students' progress. Walking away

Kevin has 12 horses at the yard he rents in Bracknell BELOW. He checks on Fernhill Tabasco, a horse campaigned by Emma and owned by Kevin



in the middle of their programmes was tough."

Em arrived fresh out of school as a working pupil and Charlotte Price, who oversees the running of Kelecyn while Kevin is away, relocated from the UK for the

same job seven years ago.

His most famous protégé, though, is Badminton winner Jock Paget. "Jocko came to me to ride and I took him on as a bricklayer. We had a yard to build," smiles Kevin. "He was as green as he says and he used to fall off all the time. We laughed a lot."

The Kiwi remains one of Kevin's best friends.

"Jocko basically did for me what I did for him in Oz. He picked me up from the airport with a bottle of champagne on ice in the lorry and I spent the first three months in the UK living with him expense free. Being able to come into someone's system where there is feed, bedding, farriers, vets, etc, already in place made coming here possible.

"My plan was to stay for three months but once I'd made the decision to stay I had to find a yard I could work out of and expand."

Ruth Honey, who owns Kevin's three-star campaigner Fernhill Quality Street, introduced him to the Perrys.

"They'd always wanted a rider based here and someone to campaign their horses. I'm very happy here."

Kevin will ride Frances Stead's 14-year-old Clifton Pinot at Burghley next month.

"About two years ago I went from having a large team of upper level horses to nothing. Most were sold and a couple had injuries so Frances and Jock giving me the ride on Pinot was a leg up."

Until now Kevin's results have depended on horses not being sold before they got to the top — and so many were.

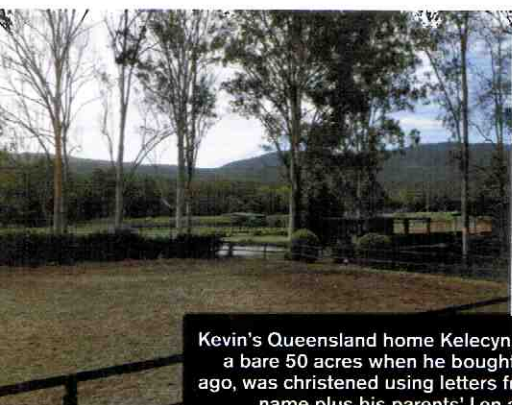
"That was my main incentive for leaving Australia because running a sales yard means that you don't keep hold of anything and that didn't help my riding career."

That decision has brought him to this moment, here in rural Berkshire, slurping tea as he considers his chances at Burghley. His target is a sub-50 final score and then the nod from Australia's selectors that he is on their elite squad.

"For me Burghley isn't about the final position, it's about the final mark. If I win on 51 I'm still out," he muses. "One pole down at Luhmühlen [where he finished fifth on 51.5] cost a lot of money."

Kevin has his eyes firmly fixed on next year's World Equestrian Games and Rio in 2016.

"Until now I've focused on being a coach and running a business rather than being a rider. As long as I have enough money to survive on a day-to-day basis I'm happy but if I didn't have Kelecyn it would be a different story." **E**



Kevin's Queensland home Kelecyn, which was a bare 50 acres when he bought it 11 years ago, was christened using letters from Kevin's name plus his parents' Len and Cynthia