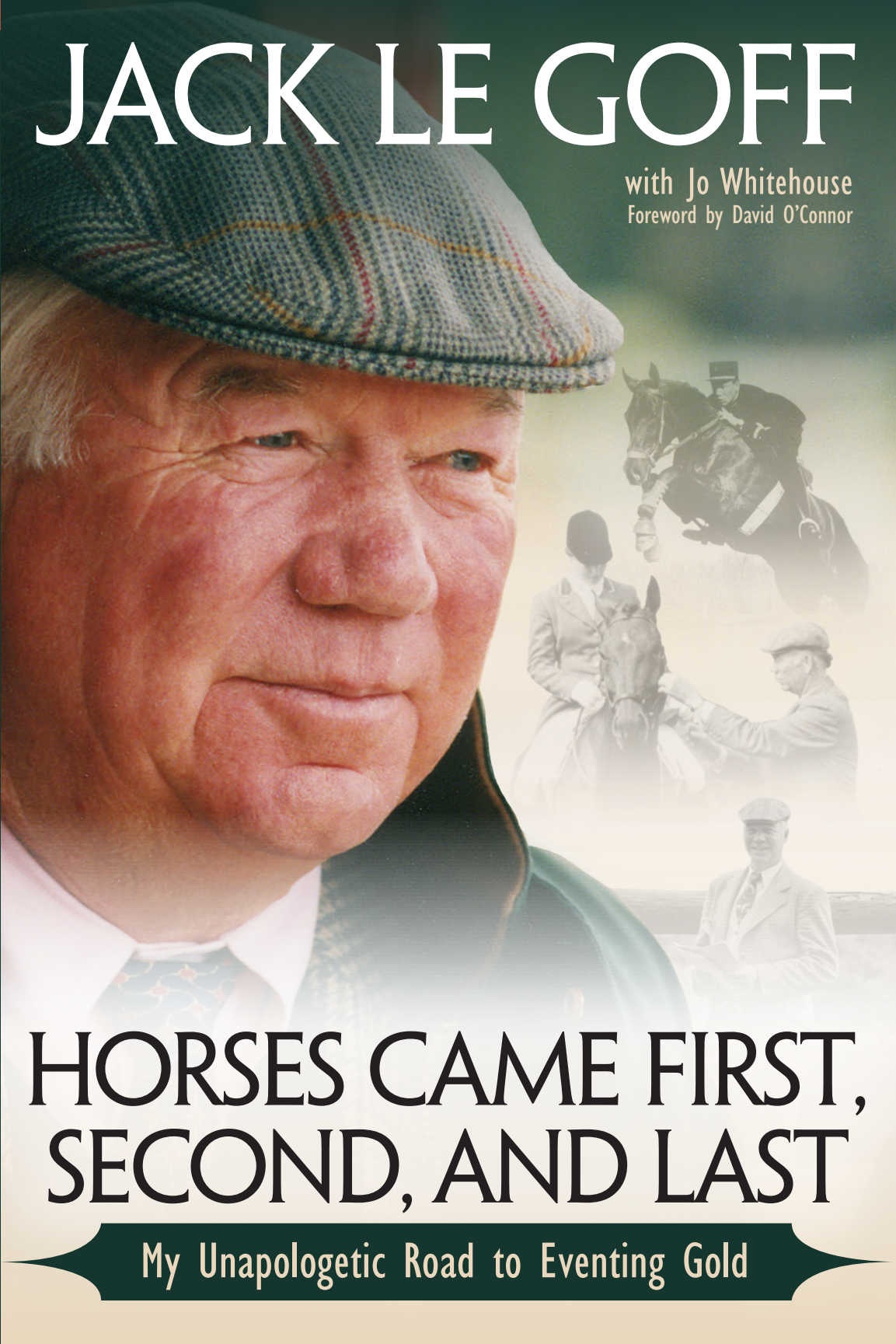


# JACK LE GOFF

with Jo Whitehouse

Foreword by David O'Connor



## HORSES CAME FIRST, SECOND, AND LAST

My Unapologetic Road to Eventing Gold

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## THE ROAD TO MONTREAL

The Olympic year always follows the Pan Ams and our results in Mexico in 1975 should have left us in a strong position looking forward to Montreal. However, not only had Golden Griffin come up lame following the outrageous incident on the Pan Am cross-country course but Victor Dakin and Good Mixture were recovering from injuries sustained after the Burghley World Championships. In 1975, Irish Cap had come down with a lung infection which had almost cost him his life and Beth Perkins' Furtive had been retired to Huntington Farm in Vermont after helping win the Pan Am gold medal. Unfortunately, he did not get to enjoy his retirement as he broke his leg and was put down in March of 1976. Beth and Furtive had been in training with me since before the 1974 World Championships, and I was saddened to hear of the loss of such a great horse.

There were three selection trials planned for the spring: Ship's Quarters in Maryland, Middletown in Delaware and Blue Ridge in Virginia. From the long list of riders who had applied to be candidates for the Team a short list would be selected based on the results of these three competitions. The shortlisted riders would train with me at Team Headquarters, and the team of four plus one reserve rider would be picked for the Games which were to be held July 22 to 25 at Bromont in Quebec.

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Neil Ayer, President of the USCTA at that time, summed up our chances in an article in the then *USCTA News* of May 1976:

“We have only six horses that have competed as many times as twice in an International Three-Day Event. They are Good Mixture (belonging to the USET and 2nd at Burghley), Irish Cap (belonging to Bruce Davidson, 1st at Burghley and 3rd at Badminton in 1974), Golden Griffin (USET, 1st at Ledyard, and 2nd at the Pan Am Games in '75), Bally Cor (USET 4th at Ledyard and 1st in Mexico in '75) Marcus Aurelius (Mary Anne Tauskey, 6th at Ledyard and 7th at the Pan Am Games in '75), and Cajun (ridden both at Ledyard and at Burghley by Caroline Treviranus). Of these six, Irish Cap and Good Mixture are back in work after long layoffs due to sickness and injury and Golden Griffin will be missing at least the first of the Olympic Selection Trials because he has not yet sufficiently recovered from injuries sustained in Mexico. Only time will tell whether or not Cappy and Mixture are up to the fast work that will be required of them and Golden Griffin would, at this juncture, have to be classified as a questionable starter. Of the other campaigners that have made it to the top Denny Emerson's Victor Dakin (Team Gold medal, Burghley, 14th individually) has been out of competition since 1974 but is now back in training and Tad Zimmerman's Fine Tune (7th Ledyard with the fastest cross-country time) and Mike Plumb's Carillon have been working for several months with the Olympic Selection Trials in view.

“With a shortage of experienced horses (and particularly with three or four of them with unsoundness in their past) Coach Jack Le Goff has been devoting much time in bringing along such combinations as Kevin Freeman on his young Egan Way, Beth Perkins on Tyson, The Sheik, and Tor, Jimmy Wofford on Touch and Go, Mike Plumb on Better and Better, Tad Coffin on Road to Ko-Ro-Ba and The Swamp Fox, and Caroline Treviranus on Comic Relief. Few of these horses have much three-day experience at the higher levels behind them but with the lack of depth we have it only makes sense to try to

bring them along to the point where one or more of them can fill in as a substitute at the last minute. We should also remember that over thirty candidates have declared themselves and will be competing at the three Selection Trials. It wouldn't be a bit surprising to see one of them come to the fore, the way Mary Anne Tauskey and Marcus Aurelius did last year, right out of nowhere so to speak, and end up on the short list for Montreal. The proving ground will be Ships Quarters, Middletown, and Blue Ridge. So very much will depend on how the experienced horses hold up and how the inexperienced horses progress at the three trials.

“What are our chances for a gold medal? Perhaps our greatest single asset is our coach Jack Le Goff. His horses and his riders will be as well trained and as well prepared as time and past experience and soundness will permit. Jack Le Goff is the most respected three-day coach in the world today. He can be expected to, and will produce a number of minor miracles but he can't be expected to accomplish the impossible. What it all boils down to is that if our good horses stay sound we have as good a chance as we have ever had to win a gold.”

While I very much appreciated Neil's generous remarks, I did feel that to succeed we would be pulling off the impossible and I knew that the next few months would be very much uphill. While our young riders Tad, Mary Anne, and Beth had produced career-best rides in Mexico at the Pan Ams, we had to face the fact that the Olympic Games are a challenge unto themselves and the pressure is at a level not experienced anywhere else. In those circumstances, it is always advisable whenever possible to have experienced, well-seasoned horses and riders who have “been there and done that.”

### **NATURAL SELECTION**

Many countries, including Britain, use a natural selection process whereby riders are left to their own devices regarding their day-to-day training. The selectors look at the results of specific events

and then select the consistently successful ones for a short training session before the big competition. My aim was always to prepare as many riders as possible to develop a wider and deeper pool of talent. That was what my four-year plan was all about, identifying those riders with potential and then providing consistent and ongoing training. I could only take four riders at a time into intensive training, but to get down to those four, I would have looked at and worked with hundreds. I was always looking for that extra something. Many competent riders are relatively successful but lack that extra something that makes the international star. That something is the competitive spirit, and it is born into a rider. If it is not there, no one can put it there. Having those riders work with me consistently over a nine-month period each year enabled me to see how the riders would stand up to pressure because I put pressure on them and in no uncertain terms. If they couldn't survive pressure from me what would happen when they went out in front of a panel of international judges and thousands of spectators.

The pressure came from my being very demanding in all aspects of competition and phases of training. I was never completely satisfied. I made them study the rule book. I insisted on them being on time for lessons and properly dressed, and their horses properly turned out. They had to stay in good physical condition, and I weighed the riders regularly. Strict self-discipline was expected and to ensure the younger riders did not get swelled heads I used to tell them, "There is only one movie star around here, and it happens to be me!" I was joking, but they were smart and got my point.

Each rider was different and had to be handled accordingly. Tad Coffin was a very talented rider, but he did not always believe how good he was so I looked for opportunities during a competition to give him confidence.

At the beginning of his career, Bruce Davidson was trying too hard to ride correctly. He would get caught at the beginning of the



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cross-country course because he was not riding aggressively and would sometimes have a stop at an easy fence. My solution was to get him furious at me (something I found very easy to do) right before he started on course. He would then go out of the start box ready to take on the world! All it means is knowing each rider and communicating with him or her accordingly.

But, while the riders often didn't like the way I dealt with them on a daily basis I know they knew that I was the one person they could rely on in all things at the competition. It was my role to relieve them of all outside distractions so they could concentrate solely on the job at hand. Some have said I was omnipresent, and that is an excellent compliment for it means that I didn't miss anything; I was there for them in all things. I considered that essential to do my job properly, and it would be no different in Montreal.

In the end, the team was picked on performance; not necessarily on objectivity alone because subjectivity has to play a large part if the goal is to send the team most likely to bring home the gold medal. The selection process is part of the preparation process, and it is progressive. My approach was not to eliminate horses and riders but to prepare as many as I could so that there was a wide choice available when the time came. Part of the preparation included educating the riders on how to handle disappointment. The hardest part about being the coach was having to tell a rider that he or she will not be on the team, and that happened in Montreal.

As it turned out, and thanks to careful conditioning, we were lucky to have Irish Cap, Good Mixture, Victor Dakin, and Golden Griffin sound and available for shipping. We took five riders and seven horses to Bromont: Mike Plumb with Good Mixture and Better and Better, Bruce Davidson with Irish Cap and Golden Griffin, Tad Coffin with Bally Cor, Denny Emerson with Victor Dakin, and Mary Anne Tauskey with Marcus Aurelius.



### **MONTREAL OLYMPICS**

Montreal, as a consequence of Munich, involved tremendous security procedures, which were understandable, but nevertheless difficult to handle. The schedule worked very well for us. First, we were allowed to walk the course. Then came the presentation of all the horses for inspection with the declaration of the team set for the next morning. Walking the course, I found it to be fairly soft in terms of difficulty. The fences were all up to height, but there was not the level of technicality that we had started to see in cross-country course design in the seventies. A few of the jumps posed some legitimate questions but overall for the Olympics, it was not in keeping with the evolution of courses at that time. The statistics would later show that it proved a very valid level of competition and some of that might have had more to do with the rigorous roads and tracks, which were very hilly and likely contributed to some tired horses out on Phase D.

Having seen the course, I sat down with Mike to talk about which horse would be best suited to be on the team. Good Mixture had all the experience and was a fabulous cross-country horse, but he was older and though perfectly sound we couldn't completely disregard the fact that he had been injured the previous year. Better and Better while young and inexperienced was totally sound and was a much better mover than Good Mixture. If the cross-country course was not going to be the deciding factor in the competition, we would have to rely on some strong dressage performances. I asked Mike what he thought and told him it was up to him to choose. He felt that Better and Better would be the best choice as with Mixture's history of leg problems he wouldn't be suited to the hilly terrain, nor the sandy track of the steeplechase. With Better and Better being much the better dressage horse (he was originally started by Carol Lavell, who went on to win the 1992 Olympic bronze medal in dressage on Gifted) Mike chose to ride him for the team. Today, Better and Better would not be qualified for this level of competition as I don't think he had yet done an Advanced three-day event, but back in 1976, he was!

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It was originally planned to have Denny Emerson and Victor Dakin ride on the team with Bruce, Mike, and Tad, but after the last gallop I checked all the horses' legs, and it was evident to me that Victor Dakin was showing signs of pending leg trouble. I knew that Denny would be bitterly disappointed, but I had to ask myself what was the point of sending a horse to the Olympics if there is a chance that he will not finish on the last day. Mary Anne Tauskey and Marcus Aurelius were named to the team instead. Denny was unprepared for that. He was extremely upset and understandably just wanted to go home. I asked him to stay and help his teammates in the competition, which he did, and I think he was very glad that he did. He had never thought of the possibility of not making the team so he had not thought out how he would react if and when the time came. I believe all riders should be prepared for the possibility of disappointment as that can be devastating after everything they have invested in the effort to make a team.

Mary Anne and her bionic pony were the first to go in dressage. Mary Anne at 5 feet 2 inches and Marcus Aurelius at 15.1 were the "David" going up against "Goliath," and the crowd took them to their hearts. Unfortunately, they cheered so loudly as she entered the ring Marcus got too fired up, and she had all she could do to keep the lid on him. Riding with great sympathy, she got him through it, but the test scored a 97.09. Tad and Bally Cor arrived in the ring to much the same welcome, but the mare was able to hold it together to go into second place on 64.59 behind West Germany's Otto Ammerman on the super stallion Volturmo. Bally Cor was a poor mover but was very obedient. Tad did a great job and rode a very precise and accurate test without one single mistake. Quite an achievement in Olympic competition!

Our two riders had put the team into first place just 5.82 penalties ahead of the West Germans. Britain's Hugh Thomas (who was to go on to become the director of the Badminton Horse Trials) was in third place on Playamar. H.R.H. Princess Anne, riding Goodwill, was,

of course, the big media attraction of the Games. She was under more pressure than any other rider there and the non-equestrian paparazzi did not let up on her. She deserved a great deal of credit for keeping a very cool head and not allowing the unrelenting attention to affect her.

The next day Madrigal, ridden by another West German, Karl Schultz, took the lead on 46.25. Bruce and Irish Cap excelled and were rewarded with second place on 54.16. The young and relatively green Better and Better scored well on 66.25, which put the United States in the lead over West Germany by 1.66 penalties.

Speed and endurance day proved daunting for many. Thunder and lightning ushered in the day and though it cleared somewhat, dark clouds and intermittent rain made the going soggy and energy sapping.

Otto Ammerman missed the final flags on steeplechase and incurred numerous time penalties for having to ride Volturmo back to correct the mistake. He was then eliminated because of “unauthorized assistance” as it was deemed that the very noisy crowd had pointed his mistake out to him—heartbreaking for such a talented horse with such huge potential.

Marcus Aurelius was first out on course for the United States and Mary Anne had been told to go steadily and conservatively. She incurred two refusals but came home with lots of information to pass on to her teammates. Theirs was the best round of any of the previous eight horses.

Princess Anne and Goodwill were going well until fence 19 when the horse tipped over. Princess Anne was knocked unconscious for a split second but got back on and completed the next seventeen fences on the course. Today that would not be permitted, but it testified to her amazing tenacity and pluck.

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The first third of the starting order produced only three clear rounds: two for Australia by riders Denis Pigott and Mervyn Bennet and one for France, rider Jean-Yves Touzaint.

The second third included Tad and Bally Cor who posted the fastest clear of the day. Karl Schultz and Madrigal also jumped clear. This group fared a little better and produced eight clear rounds in total, with Herbert Blocker being the hero of the day when he lost his stirrup leather at Fence 11 and rode the rest of the course without stirrups at all.

The last 16 could only come up with four clear rounds, and fortunately for the United States, Mike Plumb and Better and Better were among them. Lucinda Prior-Palmer (now Green) put in a brilliant round on her Be Fair who had won her Badminton in 1973 and the 1975 European championships in Luhmuhlen. Sadly, for Be Fair, he tore an Achilles tendon on his way to the finish and had to be withdrawn. Earlier in the day, Hugh Thomas had suffered a fall during his round and Playamar had pulled up lame, which, while we didn't know it at the time, put the British team out of contention.

Bruce and Irish Cap were going beautifully until the water jump when Cappy had his first fall ever in competition. Bruce was quickly back in the saddle and finished the course, and even with the fall, his round put the US into the lead by 73 points. Karl Schultz held the lead individually with Tad in second and Mike Plumb in third.

All of our horses were tired and a little stiff but Marty Simensen, the team veterinarian, pronounced them sound and well. It was the first time in the six Olympic Games I had been involved with that I had four hale and hearty horses going into the final day, and I knew that the decision to put the younger horses on the team had been the right one. Out of 12 teams of some 49 competitors from 13 countries, seven teams for a total of 30 riders completed the course. Almost 25 percent of the competitors were either eliminated or retired on course. Sixty-one percent of the entry com-

pleted the entire competition, which was a rather low percentage for that caliber of competition.

We were terribly sad for the British Team who had fallen out of contention with two lame horses, but with their true sportsmanlike spirit they rose above their disappointment, and all congratulated the Americans.

The show jumping the next day did nothing to change the standings for the teams and the gold went to the United States on 441.0, the silver to West Germany on 584.60 and the bronze to Australia with 599.54.

Though the show jumping didn't affect the team standings, it had a significant impact on the individual medals. Bally Cor jumped a beautiful clear round for Tad, but Better and Better put a foot in the water for five penalties. Madrigal and Karl Schultz tried to keep their first place, but it wasn't to be. The overnight leader of both the first and second days pulled two rails dropping to the bronze medal position and elevating Tad to gold and Mike to silver. Britain's Richard Meade rode Jacob Jones into fourth place and H.R.H. Princess Anne, none the worse for her crashing fall the previous day, rode a polished round to finish 24th with just 3.25 time penalties.

And so, I had finally achieved my Olympic dream: to coach a gold medal team. I was well pleased. But when I went back home to Hamilton, I was really at a loss. I had finally reached my goal, and I didn't know where to go from there. I shared my thinking with Madeleine, who always supported me, in the good and challenging times. However, as in most cases when questions are troubling me, I go fishing. So, I took my boat and went out on the ocean, and when I came back, I had an answer. I admitted the fact that although I had reached my goal, it would probably be at least an equal challenge to keep the team at the top of international competition. It was sufficient to motivate me for the next years to come.