

Andrew Nicholson

Andrew Nicholson at home with his Badminton prospect Swallow Springs

The Kiwi eventing star talks to Catherine Austen about his burgeoning status as a coach, why he turned down the mighty Germans and his Badminton entry



Andrew coaching the Swiss team — 'I've found it exciting, and helpful for my horses and as a rider,' he says

HOW has a someone who has never had a cross-country lesson and has no coaching qualifications ended up being one of the most sought-after cross-country coaches in the world?

When you realise we're referring to Andrew Nicholson, little explanation is needed. The New Zealander is arguably the greatest cross-country rider eventing has ever seen. And, in his own understated way, he has always been able to articulate his thoughts and feelings about horses and courses well.

It wasn't a path he particularly sought; it

'I enjoy coaching. I didn't think I would. It makes me think a lot'

started when he was asked to walk some cross-country tracks with the German riders in 2017.

Now he has agreed to train the Swiss squad, with the aim of helping them get to the Tokyo Olympics, and he's been doing some sessions with the Irish and Belgian teams. In fact, he's had to turn down the Germans this year. They wanted him to sign an exclusive contract, but he'd already said yes to the Swiss.

"They are nice people and I didn't want to let them down," says Andrew.

There's also the possibility the underdog Swiss appealed more than the reigning Olympic champions. For years, Andrew has given his course-walking time and advice freely to fellow riders, particularly those who do not have masses of help and support.

"I've known Dominik Burger, the Swiss team vet and chef d'equipe, for years," he explains. "At the World Equestrian Games last year, he asked me if I'd be interested in coaching their riders on the cross-country. I watched them and they have some good young riders. They aren't overly experienced, but what they can do, they do well."

"They are keen, nice to work with and soak up everything you tell them. Most of them have other jobs or are at university."

He has also done a couple of sessions with the Irish squad and one with the Belgians.

"I enjoy it. I didn't think I would," he says

with a broad grin. "It's made me think a lot, from the basics of how to structure what I do with them over two days. That in itself is quite a challenge for someone like me — to consider exactly why I do something."

"I've found it exciting, and helpful for my horses and as a rider. When you are working with good riders, even if they are young, and you are getting them to push their boundaries, you can learn from watching them."

To this point, his work with the Swiss has been indoors.

"We've reached the stage of putting up some tricky stuff. I'm trying to simulate how much they have to concentrate and how hard they have to work across country," says Andrew.

"It is easy to watch the good riders going round Badminton and think they are doing nothing, that they are just in a rhythm, but they are making everything happen. It only looks easy because they are strong with their leg and in their core, have good hand-eye coordination and they and their horse know each other well."

"It's like me watching showjumpers Marcus Ehning and Scott Brash — they turn and pop over a 1.60m fence, turn and pop over another, and it looks simple. But it's not."

He continues: "It is noticeable in the way some of the Swiss riders ride and sit that they have done a lot of showjumping and they understand rhythm, stride and balance. They are good clinically; I've tried to mix it up, so they learn to react and fix things instinctively."

THIS commitment to the Swiss is taking things a step further than his course-walking sessions with the Germans.

"I've even been making notes on the plane on the way home on each of them: 'This horse will run out to the left given half a chance; this one shifts to the right; this rider gets a little nervy when you mention an open corner'. If you can go up to them just before they go into the start box and say, 'Remember this,' it can make a big difference," he says.

The most important attribute for a rider, he says, is their work ethic.

"Talent makes things easy, but it is work ethic that makes someone repeat something over and over and makes them stay fit and focused. Then instinct is developed. If you are talented but lazy, your mind will wander and then your instincts aren't going to be quick."

"Horses are the same; you can have a talented horse, but if he is one that gets bored and starts thinking outside the box, you can lose his concentration at a vital moment. Another horse might be a bit of a plodder, but he keeps focused because he wants to do it and is finding it hard, so he's concentrating. It's like the tortoise and the hare."

THIS brings us to Andrew's own Badminton entry, the able if occasionally wayward Swallow Springs, third at Burghley on his dressage score last year.

Left to his own devices, Swallow Springs "would be thinking about what he is having for lunch and when he last dumped you", grins Andrew. "You have to tell him from the get-go that this is serious today and there is no food until he finishes..."

The 11-year-old feels, Andrew says, more mature mentally this year.

"Every time you finish a long-format event, the horse improves mentally," he states. "Even the not-so-good ones. If you can get them through to showjumping day, they start to improve. It's the last three or four minutes of the cross-country when they have to concentrate or they don't get round. I think they have a break and come back from there stronger and with more belief in themselves."

It is why he doesn't believe in pulling up fit, sound horses across country if they have a run-out and "saving them for another day".

He says: "You are telling a horse that if he feels a bit tired and runs out, then we go home. They don't come out better next time, usually, they go worse."

Swallow Springs is Andrew's only horse at five-star (previously four-star), but the eight-year-olds As Is and Andrea BT4 will be aimed at Bramham.

"I have 11 to compete this year, all nice ones," he says.

And that figure doesn't include his five four-year-olds. The coaching is a fascinating extra string to his bow and one that will, hopefully, extend his longevity in the sport.

He has no desire, however, to be any country's chef d'equipe.

NEXT WEEK US showjumping world gold medallist Adrienne Sternlicht



Andrew finishes third at Burghley last year on his talented top ride, Swallow Springs