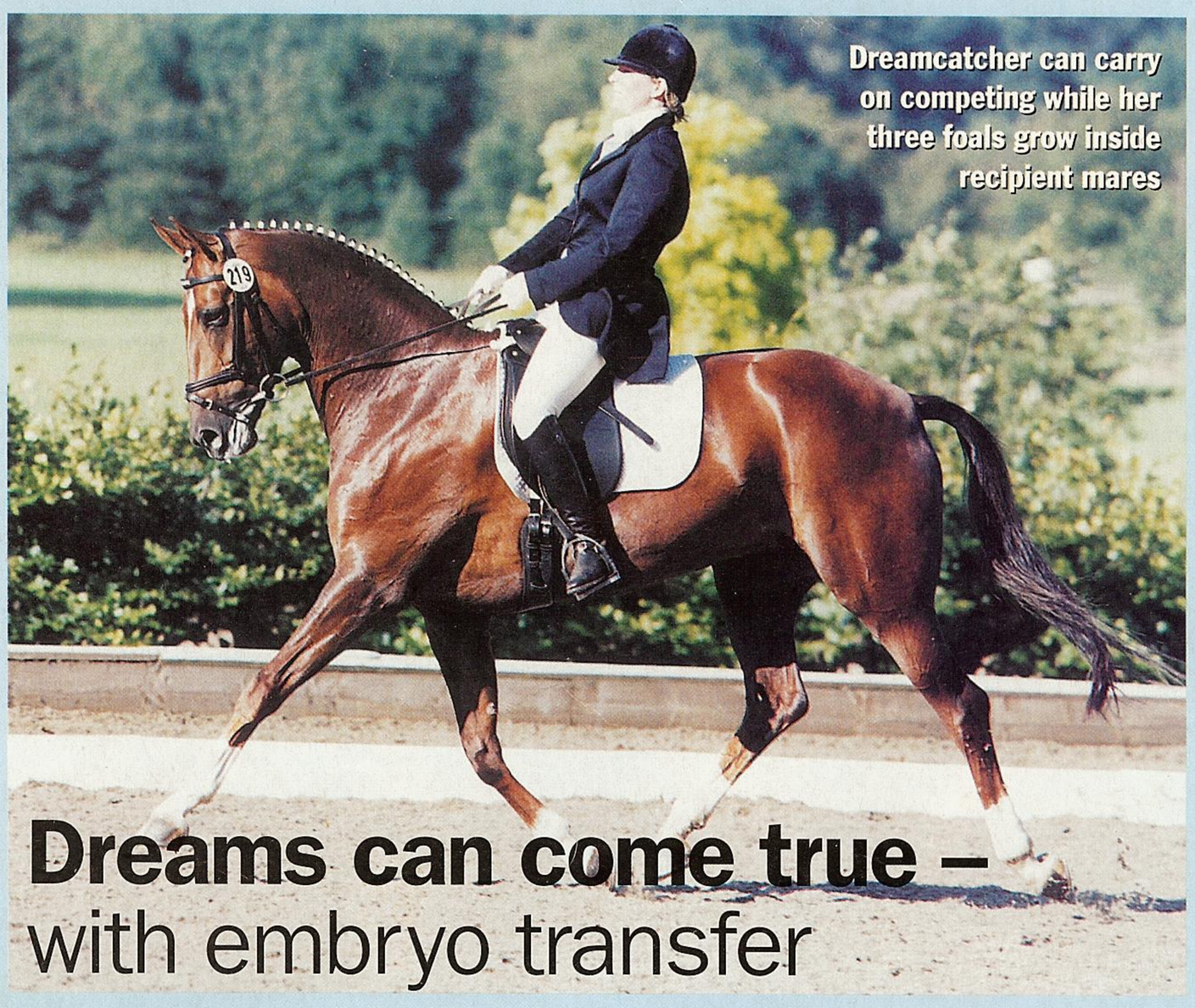
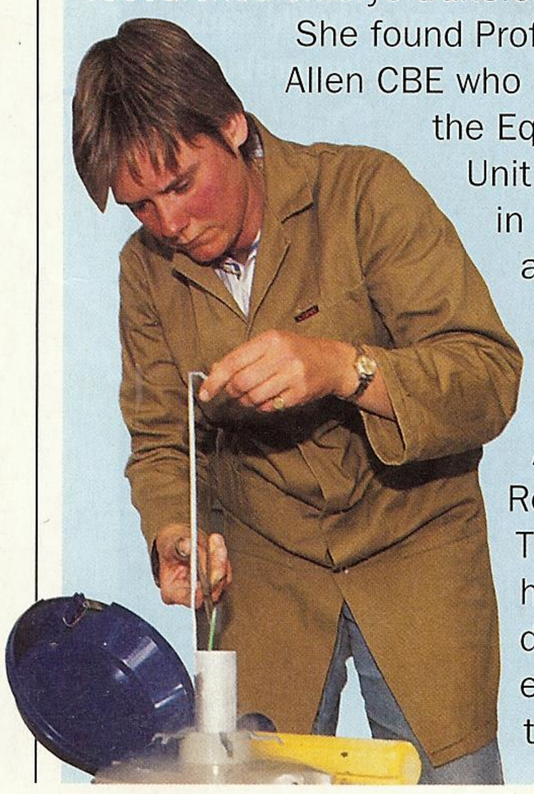


Dreamcatcher can carry on competing while her three foals grow inside recipient mares

Dreams can come true – with embryo transfer

Breeding from a competition mare usually means the mare will lose a season of competing. Jill Heywood from Gloucestershire had just this dilemma, with her competition mare, Dreamcatcher, who had won several Young Horse classes with Carl Hester - and is now at Medium level with Jill. She is now a top-class competition horse, with "an absolutely wonderful temperament", says Jill, who was fully aware that her mare is one of only a few with bloodlines from the German stallion Dream of Glory, by Donnerhall – who very sadly died of colic last year. Jill wanted to continue the bloodline, but she also wanted her mare to continue competing at the same time, so she researched embryo transfer.



She found Professor Twink Allen CBE who is based at the Equine Fertility Unit in Newmarket, and whose company – Vet Art (Veterinary Assisted Reproduction Technology) – has been developing embryo transfers.

How did it work?

So Dreamcatcher was brought into season, then scanned to check the size and state of the follicle. Interestingly, Dreamcatcher is prone to double ovulating – producing two ovum germ cells. This would be a problem if she was covered naturally, as she'd keep producing twins with little chance of the foals surviving. However, this was an asset with embryo transfer as it offered two chances of an embryo developing.

The mare was artificially inseminated with fresh semen from the Hanoverian stallion Dimaggio. Seven days later, Dreamcatcher was back at the clinic to have the possible embryo flushed out in a saline solution. The process was not stressful – in fact, Dreamcatcher won two Elementary classes the next day!

Seeking success

The saline solution was then taken to the lab where it was filtered and analysed under a microscope – until this point, there is no guarantee that an embryo is present, but in Dreamcatcher's case there were two!

The clinic has a herd of broodmares on standby and when a competition mare comes into season to be covered, two potential recipient broodmares are given a fertility drug. This encourages the mares' seasons to synchronise with each other.

The embryo can then be transferred non-surgically or surgically which, incidentally, has the higher success rate. Having already experienced a failed non-surgical transfer, Jill decided to opt for the embryos to be surgically transferred. This involved the recipient mares being put under general anaesthetic, so that the embryo could be positioned in the uterus.

A remarkable result!

Post-surgery, the mares were left for two to three weeks before being scanned again. In the meantime, the clinic offers the mare owner the chance to have another go, in case the first transfer is not successful through to pregnancy. Jill took up the option, so the process was repeated with the hope that of the three attempts, one foal would be produced. And it was only when scanning the broodmares several weeks after the transfers took place, that the result was evident – all three mares were pregnant!

Jill was full of praise for the procedure that has sometimes been labelled 'unnatural'. "For starters, it's not stressful for the mare," says Jill, "and you are breeding from good quality horses whose parentage can be guaranteed. It's also nice for the broodmares, as they are given another job in life and, of course, you can carry on competing in the meantime.

Was it worth it?

"The cost has been quite high – around £5,000 per foal so far. Some of this is because you have to rent the broodmares and keep them for 18 months. However, hopefully I will end up with three foals bred exactly as I dreamed of and I'll probably keep one and sell the other two," says Jill. We'll keep you informed of their progress!

The recipient mares, all carrying one of Dreamcatcher's foals