



Age just a number for Mark Todd

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HONG KONG, Aug 12 (Reuters) - Back out of retirement for the Beijing Olympics at the age of 52, New Zealand rider Mark Todd is already contemplating a crack at the London Games in 2012.

"Age is just a number," one of the greatest riders in the history of three-day eventing told Reuters. "I think I can get back and be competitive at the top level. I have enjoyed it."

Todd, an individual gold medallist at the 1984 and 1988 Games, may be languishing in 29th place in Hong Kong after the cross-country stage of the event but the fire is back in his belly.

"I didn't feel old, I didn't feel stiff. I felt just as I did in the past. It was really good," said the tall, lithe rider, back from retirement after eight years and buzzing once more with the adrenaline of competition.

"It feels like I have never been away from the sport. At the start of the cross country yesterday I felt just as nervous at the start as I always did and I then had the same buzz at the end."

So what about London in 2012?

"I am thinking about it," said the man voted Rider of the 20th Century by the International Equestrian Federation.

Todd retired after the 2000 Olympics, where he won a bronze, and set up a stud to breed and train racehorses. "I went to the Athens Olympics as a trainer but I didn't enjoy it. It was all work and no fun."

Over what he called "an evening of several bottles of wine", he jokingly challenged some friends to find him a horse for the 2008 Games.

Four months later they called his bluff and came up with the grey Gandalf.

The horse has not quite proved to be the equine goldmine all of New Zealand had hoped for, but Todd has no regrets about seizing his chance for a dream comeback.

"The opportunity presented itself and I didn't want to say to myself in 10 years' time I wish I had done that. It all just fell into place for me," he said.

The horse is almost as relaxed as Todd himself. Unperturbed by smoke going off or loud music blaring in his ear, Gandalf even found fame appearing in a video by New Zealand rap artist Scribe.

"There is no doubt. He is getting better and better," Todd said of Gandalf, whom he was riding for only the eighth time in competition when they teamed up in Hong Kong, host of the equestrian events at the Beijing Games.

Todd clearly revels being at the cutting edge of the sport again. "Eventing is a great community. They are genuinely nice people," he said.

Already new targets are appearing up on the horizon. "I would like to go to the World Championships in Kentucky in 2010. That is where I started my international career back in 1978."

Next stop after that could be London. "It is certainly a possibility," he said. "I shall have to sit down and discuss it with my wife." (Editing by Nick Macfie)

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