

From The Magazine: Thomas Heffernan Ho Is Making History For Hong Kong

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Seven years ago, Thomas Heffernan Ho was happily putting his university degree to good use, working in hotel management in London and his home country of Hong Kong.

He'd grown up taking lessons in riding schools and enjoyed watching his brother Daniel Heffernan Ho ride, but he'd never seriously competed himself.

Then came a call from Hong Kong eventer Nicole Pearson that would change his life: Pearson, a friend from his riding-school days, told him Hong Kong was trying to field a team for the 2014 FEI Asian Games in Incheon, South Korea, and they needed riders.



Thomas Heffernan Ho is the first eventer from Hong Kong to compete at an Olympic Games aboard 20-year-old Tayberry. Jayphotos.co.uk Photo

Thomas hadn't ridden for several years, but the pull of horses was strong, so he went off to England to train. With the Asian Games approaching and six months of support from his father, Freddy Ho, Thomas put himself on a tight timeline to try to reach the CCI2* level.

He competed in his first CCI2*-S in June 2014, and by September, he and his teammates Annie Ho and Pearson had brought home a team bronze medal from Incheon.

Now, nearly eight years after diving into eventing, he is in Tokyo as the first event rider to represent Hong Kong in the Olympic Games. He rides Tayberry, a 20-year-old, 15.1-hand gelding who has brought Thomas, 32, from the two-star level to the pinnacle of the sport.

“The Olympics was never in my targets with this horse or within myself, but it just kind of fell in place,” Thomas said. “My team around me really helped me a lot, and the horse really stepped up to the challenge.”

Born and raised in Hong Kong to a Chinese father and an Irish mother, Thomas trained casually at a riding school with Pearson while he was growing up.

“We never really evented because in Hong Kong the space is not that big,” he said. “I had to learn to gallop in the U.K., which I found really hard! I was amazed even walking the courses. It just felt really long. I was used to show jumping and dressage, but we never had the cross-country side in Hong Kong.



Thomas Heffernan Ho with his other four-star horse Shannondale Vintage. Photo Courtesy Of Thomas Heffernan Ho

“I always wanted to represent Hong Kong within the Asian Games, but riding is an expensive sport, and you’ve just got to have the opportunity to be selected on teams, and I was kind of a bit phased out because of university,” he continued.

He went to university in Switzerland and landed a job at a Hilton hotel in London before heading back to work at a hotel in Hong Kong.

At the time that Thomas got the call from Pearson, Hong Kong had fairly strong dressage and show jumping teams for the Asian Games but was struggling to make numbers for eventing.

Once he got the hang of galloping, the cross-country came easily for Thomas.

“It’s a lot of the braveness,” he said. “I guess it’s the boy side of me! You just kind of have to make it happen. There’s a lot of trust between you and your horse. It’s always been something I really enjoyed.”

In England, he trained with Lucinda Fredericks and Chris Burton. Fredericks found him Tayberry, a Belgian Warmblood (Feridoon—Rismo, Kimball) who had campaigned to advanced with Isobel Hudson.

“As soon as I sat on him, he put a massive smile on my face,” Thomas said. “He’s a real character. He thinks he’s the biggest horse on the farm. He probably knows all the worst habits ever, but he knows he’s important.”



Photo Courtesy Of Thomas Heffernan Ho

“He was just meant to be a schoolmaster really,” he said. “I didn’t know much about eventing, and I had gone to two-star level. He was meant to take me up the ranks to three-star and get me a bit of knowledge and educate me a bit in the sport. Then he just kept going.”

Tayberry shows no signs of slowing down at his age, and Thomas says fitness is the secret to his longevity.

“He’s never really ready to retire,” Thomas said. “I go back to Hong Kong every winter, and every time I come back I always expect him to behave a bit better, but he seems to get worse as he gets older! Then it just fills me with confidence because I know he’s not ready to retire. I was at Nunney [International] Horse Trials [England] a few weeks ago doing three-star, and he looked like a 10-year-old going around that course. It was pretty effortless. I think it’s just keeping him fit and active. It’s like people. The minute you kind of relax a bit or for too long your body kind of seizes up. You’ve just got to keep him moving, mentally and physically. I always say every year, he’ll tell me how he feels.”

Growing The Sport

Thomas, who is also a team silver medalist from the most recent Asian Games in 2019 in Pattaya, Thailand, is able to have six horses and live in the U.K. to train because of support from the Hong Kong Jockey Club Development Program and funds from a government sports institute.

He’s been competing at the four-star level for four years, the only rider from Hong Kong to have achieved that level of success. He hopes more athletes will reach that level soon.

“I think it sparked a drive in my team,” he said of his achievements. “I’m based with a younger rider, Yuxuan Su. He’s driving himself to get to that level, but most of us are at the three-star level.”

He travels home to visit his family every winter from his base in Hampshire and tries to coach a few riders to help with development.

“We had our first one-star two years ago before COVID,” he said. “It was quite nice. It’s heading in the right direction, but in terms of eventing, I don’t know if it would ever get to the scale it is in Europe.”

These days, he’s based with Australian five-star rider Stephen Way and his wife Mel Way, who grooms Tayberry for him.

“I feel very proud,” he said of qualifying for Tokyo. “It’s a great honor to compete with the best. I’ve only been doing this sport for eight years now. It’s all a massive experience for me, but I’m just going to make the most of the experience and try and get as much out of it as I can. Hopefully, one day we’ll have a team like China or Thailand going to the World Equestrian Games or the Olympics.”