



Sharn Wordley, left, and Craig Martin joined forces to found Wordley Martin after crossing paths several times across the globe.

A TALE OF TWO KIWIS

THE WORDLEY MARTIN STORY

By Amanda Picciotto Feitosa

Getting to the top of any industry is a mix of determination, expertise and a little bit of luck. Fellow equestrians know adding horses to that equation makes the climb for success even more unique. That's the case for Sharn Wordley and Craig Martin, two international show jumping athletes who grew up in New Zealand. Their equestrian

architecture and riding surface company, Wordley Martin, came to fruition from their intersecting life paths across the globe.

CRAIG AND HIS GRANDFATHER

Neither Craig nor Sharn was raised in particularly horsey households, though each of their families had some connection to horses.

Craig's father rode a horse to school and Craig did the same growing up, but his first experiences came from his grandfather, who, in addition to being a farmer, also competed racers and trotters in his spare time.

"It was a hobby," Craig said of his grandfather's riding. "It was three or four horses at a time, and he would compete those horses. He quit race jockeying because he had too many crashes, and then he got into the whole trotting thing."

Craig's grandfather did seem to have a way with the horses he competed and was quite successful, even winning the Inter Dominion Grand Final, one of the largest trotting races in the Australasian area. "He was the first person that actually threw me on a horse when I was young," Craig said. "I have memories of being on the backs of his trotters with their long manes."

SHARN AND THE CIRCUS

Sharn's family was also not involved with the show jumping world. However, his maternal grandmother's family operated a circus. In fact, it was the biggest circus in the Southern Hemisphere. Sharn's grandmother followed in her uncle's footsteps as the lead horse trainer, but when she got married, she gave it up. Even still, her love of horses persisted through mementoes and other keepsakes. Horses weren't as easily accessible for Sharn, but like every equestrian knows, horses are just something that is a part of you.

"I always had a passion for horses right from a very, very young age," Sharn said. "On my 3rd birthday, I had Shetland pony rides at my party, but my love for horses far predated that, so it was just something that was ingrained at a really young age, and I don't really know where it came from. I must have seen one of my grandma's books; my earliest memories are of her and all of her horse books and memorabilia."

The young men couldn't kick their horsey habits and eventually crossed paths for the first time when Craig came to Sharn's neck of the woods in Plimmerton, New Zealand, to try a pony. When reminiscing, they finally agreed between themselves on how old they were at the time. Sharn laughed, "I was 11 then and he was 12 because he's a year older than me. You can add that in!"

As their Junior careers blossomed, Sharn and Craig saw each other quite a bit on the

national New Zealand circuit competing in the Young Riders division. Instead of pursuing college degrees, much to the dismay of their fathers, they both did what many young New Zealanders do: They left.

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little island stuck down in the South Pacific," Sharn said. "Whether you're horsey or not, that's part of what young New Zealanders want to do, and that was in us as well. Plus, it's a very small riding scene in New Zealand, so we wanted to get out there and learn and give it a shot. So, the second we could, we went."

A WORLD BEYOND NEW ZEALAND

Sharn had just won the New Zealand Young Rider Championships, which was sponsored by Canadian Airlines. Fittingly, his prize was a round-trip ticket to Calgary, Alberta, Canada, to watch the Spruce Meadows 'Masters' tournament. In 1992, it was much easier to change flight details, so Sharn called up Canadian Airlines and instead arranged to leave 11 months earlier. He traveled around Canada going to different shows and meeting people, including international Grand Prix rider Kyle King, whom Sharn now counts as a good friend. At the conclusion of his 11-month tour, Sharn went back to New Zealand for a summer. He then took his horse and went straight back to Canada, where he got a job working for Brent and Laura Balisky at Thunderbird Show Park in Langley, British Columbia, and stayed for a year.

Sharn couldn't fight the itch to see even more of the world, so he jetted off to the Indio show circuit in California, where he met Irish Olympian Kevin Babington and started cleaning stalls for him. They struck up a friendship that would prove to be important down the road. Toward the end of the circuit, Sharn had a strong desire to head to Europe next. He had just won the High Amateur Jumper Classic for \$10,000 when he serendipitously overheard some guys talking in the stable area. One of their horses had gotten sick and wouldn't be able to fly on their scheduled trip to Holland.

All of the horses in Sharn's program train daily on a Wordley Martin footing surface, including the gallop track around his property in Kentucky.
Photo by Megan McDermott



From their international grand prix experience, Craig, left, and Sharn developed a feeling for footing, creating their own unique mixture they use today.



"I paid my horse show bill, and I had \$2,000 left over," Sharn remembered. "That's all I had, so I offered them \$1,400 for the single spot on the flight for my horse and they accepted. I went to Europe with \$600, a suitcase, a tack trunk and my horse 48 hours later."

Since Sharn didn't know anyone and had nowhere to go when he arrived in Holland, he spent six days in horse services looking through ads for jobs in horse magazines. Finally, horse services connected him with a stall cleaning job at Stal Hendrix. He spent six months there, then headed to Ireland to jump the Millstreet Derby as preparation to later jump the Hickstead Derby in England. As Sharn said, "It just went from there on."

During the time Sharn was in Canada and California, Craig had ventured to England. Similarly, he had no contacts there, so he found a job in the *Horse & Hound* magazine listings for a grooming position with English hunter specialist David Tetlow. He spent a summer there making £60 per week and then went back to New Zealand for a year before returning to England. This time around, Craig landed an apprenticeship with British Olympian Tim Stockdale.

That's when the Kiwis crossed paths again. They spent a couple of years running separate

businesses out of the same facility in England, then moved to Belgium to start a horse sales business together. After four years, they decided to head to the United States. Arriving stateside at the end of 2004, they went their separate ways, with Sharn running a business in California and Craig operating his own business between California and Colorado. In 2006, they traveled separately to the East Coast where they then linked up once more.

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Through all their adventures, Sharn and Craig noticed the footing in the American arenas was inferior to what they had experienced abroad. It was often old, decomposed granite and dirt that was dusty and unsupportive to the horse's footfalls. Though they had no experience in construction, Sharn and Craig recognized that there was a huge opportunity for a company to upgrade the caliber of riding surfaces across the country. They knew what footing they liked riding and training on, so they honed in on the best examples they saw riding in Europe and began researching the specifics of what those footing providers offered.

When they were ready to build their first arena, they called Kevin Babington. Sharn's

relationship with the high-profile Irish Olympian proved to be pivotal, as it provided the perfect opportunity to get Wordley Martin off and running. As the guinea pigs for Sharn and Craig's project, Kevin and the owner of his horses put up the money for the arena's construction at their farm. In the end, it was a success.

"In the beginning, it was more of a hobby business for us," said Sharn of the Wordley Martin endeavor, which was incorporated in 2007. "We knew there was business opportunity, but we were also just purely interested in the creation of good footing. We were footing snobs from our riding backgrounds, so it was an exciting thing for us to do. The added bonus was that if we got it right, there was a real market for it. We started building for our friends, and then it just grew."

Even as the company has taken off, Sharn and Craig haven't put other aspects of their lives on hold. Somehow, they manage to pursue excellence in other areas while simultaneously growing their joint business venture. Sharn has gone on to be ranked among the top 50 show jumping riders in the world and has represented New Zealand at the highest level of the sport, including at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games

in Tryon, North Carolina. In addition to continuing to compete at the Grand Prix level, Craig operates a successful real estate business and is a competitive Ironman and ultra-marathon athlete. In addition, he is now one of a select list of professionals worldwide who are qualified as an FEI Approved Footing Specialist. They both also have families and young children, which also plays a large part in their lives.

While their plates are undoubtedly full, Sharr and Craig have personally overseen the installation of more than 450 arenas throughout the United States, building for top athletes across the Olympic disciplines of show jumping, eventing, and dressage. Through their worldwide travel and sport backgrounds, they have achieved a dream they didn't even know they had. **SI**

For more information, visit WordleyMartin.com/Welcome

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Sharr, competing at the World Equestrian Center in Ocala, Florida, with Casper, classifies himself as a "footing snob" after traveling and competing internationally.
Photo by Andrew Ryback Photography