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Cheltenham & Three Counties Race Club



Cheltenham Gold Cup Winner Al Boum Photo and Paul Townend

  
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## RICHARD DAVIS AWARD

For the Top Conditional Jockey riding at Cheltenham, Chepstow, Hereford, Ludlow, Stratford, Warwick and Worcester during the period 6<sup>th</sup> May 2019 – 26<sup>th</sup> April 2020

(Sponsored by the Cheltenham & Three Counties Race Club)

Scoring: a Winner 10 points, a Second 7 points, a Third 4 points, a Fourth 2 points.

### Final Placings for the 2019 – 2020 season

1 <sup>st</sup>	Connor Brace	239 pts
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Jonjo O'Neill Jr	212 pts
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Ben Jones	178 pts
4 <sup>th</sup>	Bryan Carver	117 pts
5 <sup>th</sup>	Charlie Price	93 pts
6 <sup>th</sup>	Richard Patrick	92 pts



Richard Davis was a talented jump jockey tragically killed in a fall over fences in 1996. This award is named in his memory.

### Tipster Competition

With horse racing in the UK completely suspended until beyond the closedown date of Saturday 2nd May, but with the Irish Authorities still harbouring thoughts of a resumption within 10 days of their Government sanction, we are potentially at the end of the Competition. A full list of confirmed prize-winners and their respective awards will be published in the next Club Magazine.

## *The Adventures of Dodge and Pacha....*

*By Lucy Sharp*

So, since the last article lots of things have happened and changed. The world as we all know it has been turned upside down in recent weeks... we have gone from the non stop busy days of our everyday lives to being stuck in our homes on lockdown. For me, along with many of you I'm sure, the only time of escape and chance of sanity is when I can get out and be with my boys. Down at the stables or out on a ride with them is now the only chance I can have at a glimpse of my normal life.

Before all of this kicked off and brought a dark cloud above us all, I talked about the boys getting ready for some exciting times. Pacha was getting fit and ready for a days hunting and Dodge was getting fit and ready for Cheltenham, to take part in the RoR Parade at the festival.

Firstly, Pacha. He was first to

get out and about for his day out. We had the local hunt meet at my parents farm. What a day it was. Although a very wet and windy day, it was a lovely day too. I had a very hectic day to start with as I had all of the horses to do before getting Pacha ready for his debut. I had 5 horses to muck out and put on the horse walker before even looking at my boys. I made sure I gave Pacha a bubble bath the evening before when I got him in from the field so that he was looking amazing. In the morning I then mucked out the boys and their girlfriend before beginning to make Pacha look beautiful. I gave his white sock a quick wash (seeing as he couldn't possibly keep it clean for one evening) so that was glowing white, a quick flick over to make sure he was even more beautiful then he already is and then began to plait his mane and

tail. And my goodness did he look smart, even if I do say so myself. I know I felt the pressure to look just as good on board so I didn't show him up that's for sure. He stood steady as a rock at the meet, good job as I helped myself to all of my mums homecooked sausage rolls, cake and egg sandwiches, let alone a sneaky port or two. I don't normally drink, let alone at 10 o'clock in the morning but there is something about being stood in a field in the middle of a winters morning in the freezing cold that makes it all okay.



We had a great day, especially as one of my childhood friends came along for the day as well. Denise and I have known each other since we were kids. We

went to Pony Club together, we were inseparable back then. Pacha was amazing and he made it very clear to me and everyone around him that he was very happy to be out again. I now know exactly what Will Biddock meant when he said... Pacha Du Polder... MACHINE!! Indeed he is, he gave me the best days hunting I've ever had and was a complete gentleman to me seeing as I haven't been out for a good couple years.



All I can say is bring on next season. Hopefully we will get some more chances to go out then we did this year. But in the mean time, we are going to try our hand at a spot of showing. Hopefully. Fingers crossed this whole ordeal

we find ourselves in at the moment is over and we can have a nice few outings this summer.



As you all know by now, I have two handsome boys in my life. The one and only Dodging Bullets! Where do I start with him? We have just had the three year anniversary of having him at home with me which means it is now nine years that I have had him in my life. And what an amazing nine years it has been!! My love continues for this amazing boy and would not change him for the world. He's been right by my side through some rough times this past year and has helped me through the lot. He loves his life, gives his all no matter

what he does and does me proud at everything he does! We have been getting ready to parade again at Cheltenham for the RoR parade. We had a great time again this year. Despite all the worry over what was brewing, the RoR organised a great day, and made us feel very welcome and delivered a stress free day. I gave Dodge a bath the evening before to make sure that he was looking his best for the day. We started the day by making sure the rehab horses were sorted, mucked out and had their time on the walker. Followed by heading over to Ditcheat to borrow the lorry that Mr Nicholls kindly let me borrow for the day. Back to get all the gear and Dodge bandaged up and loaded. We had a good journey there to arrive at 10 o'clock. We unloaded the gear and found Dodge his stable before taking him to have another bubble bath after getting a little sticky as always on the journey over. We then returned to the

stable to get him plaited up and ready to go. We were on board and in the arena waiting for 12 o'clock. We headed up to the parade ring in number order. Walking up the track the runners normally canter down to the start, In front of the stands, seeing the crowds from a different angle that I have always been used to and what an amazing feeling it is.



To be riding the horse around the parade ring that I used to lead around for the jockey to get on. To show him off to the crowds and all of his owners was amazing. To hear the

comments from both parties on how well he looked and how he looked like he was ready to get back out there again. It was nice to feel him enjoying himself this year. He loved being back there, strutting his stuff with confidence and sass. He does me proud everyday but the smile beaming across my face said it all.

I don't know where I would be without my boys at this current time. And I'm sure that anyone else that has a horse will agree with me, they definitely make these days bearable and a happier place when I am with them. I hope everyone stays safe in these hard and scary times.

Lots of love Lucy, Dodge and Pacha x

Editor: It was a pleasure to see Dodge going round the parade ring and didn't he look a picture.

## David Massey Article

As we all sit in our homes, with time meaning nothing whatsoever and (as I type) no sign of a resumption in racing, I, and indeed many freelancers like myself, worry for our futures. The Cheltenham Festival, despite only being a couple of weeks ago, might as well been a year, it seems so far in the distance. The debates as to whether we should have been there in the first place will go on for some time, but that's neither here nor there now it happened, and I'm glad it did.

I was lucky enough to enjoy three days of the racing and picked up plenty of pointers for the future - if Nigel Twiston-Davies hasn't got a good horse on his hands in One True King, then I'll go to the foot of our stairs, as my old Grandad would have said - but the rumours of a shutdown prompted me to take a couple of days work at the end of the week. Here's my view, from a pitch in Tatts, of how Gold Cup Day went for one of the ring's most recognizable

moustaches....

I'd been at a rainy Stratford on the Monday when Barry Pinnington - aka Pinno, Matt Chapman's darling in the ring - asked me if I'd like to work Gold Cup day with him, as he was short of a worker. Now, the original plan was to just go and enjoy myself for the four days and just do some writing, but with the looming shutdown of racing and a distinct lack of work for the foreseeable future, I decided I'd give him a hand. I'm glad I did really, as I impressed them that much he's already booked me for all four days next year!

I jumped up on the joint with Tim (his business partner) about an hour before the first. I was very surprised how long it took before it got even remotely busy. You'd expect, on Gold Cup day, for it to be rammed solid but that wasn't the case. 15 minutes before the Triumph though, it starts to pick up. Goshen is the one. They all want Goshen, and we can barely take a penny for Solo. I don't fancy Goshen myself, I think

his jumping will let him down, and have place laid him on the exchanges for a few quid.

At the off Goshen is by far and away our biggest loser. One bookmaker near us took a £5000-£2000 near the off and he doesn't want it either. Turning in, we all know our fate...

And then something unbelievable happens. With the race at his mercy, and his opponents all but dust in the distance, Goshen unseats his Jamie Moore at the last. You can't believe it. Punters go from cheering their winner in to a stunned disbelief as Burning Victory, an unconsidered outsider, is left to pick up the pieces. I have never heard a large crowd so quiet. (But I will do again later.)

We've got lucky, very lucky. Sometimes you need a lot of luck in this game, whatever side of the fence you are on, and we got some there.

Can we kick on from this and make it a good day? After all, there's a competitive handicap coming up, loads of runners, many chances to get the

favourite beat. The Mullins backers, buoyed by their good fortune in the first, are piling in to Saint Roi. The euros are flying in, and at the off, it is a bad result for us if it wins. It's obvious coming to the last that, bar some Goshen-like misfortune, Saint Roi is going to win and this time we don't get lucky. That puts a dent in the first race profits for sure.

And here they come again. "€200 Monkfish" is the first bet I lay. I take a £400 bet on him as well, the Mullins army are simply throwing the cash at us now. Bang, in it goes, and it's 2-1 to the punters. The payout queue is a long one.

He's won the first three, he can't win the first four, can he? Well, it's Gold Cup time and Al Boum Photo is carrying the hopes for those that have had the Mullins yankee. I take a £300 and a £200 bet on him in quick succession, plus plenty of Euros as the Irish come in to back him. Delta Work, by contrast, isn't that popular and it's Santini that is the other loser in the book. As the race progresses, and

there are simply so many in with a chance at the top of the hill, we start to hope that there might be something to get us a result. What's this down the outside, travelling like a dream? It's Real Steel, that's what. That gets us the jackpot and it would be some irony if a Mullins horse was to save our bacon after all. Sadly, his effort is rather short-lived, and to our dismay, it's the two bogeys that fight out the finish. Al Boum Photo wins his second Gold Cup and any profits left from that first race are now well and truly wiped. Foxhunters time. One Irish guy steps in and has €600 on Shantou Flyer at 7-2. He takes a step back from the joint after placing his bet, has another look, and steps back up with another €400. Tim doesn't fancy it and happy to stand the lion's share. Billaway is popular (of course) and at bigger prices so too is Law Of Gold, backed in from 33s to 12s at the off. It's a strange race to watch, with them strung out like washing for much of the contest, but as they start to bunch, one goes

clear. It's a 66-1 shot, It Came To Pass. This can't hang on, can it? It can. Never, ever have I heard total silence as a horse wins at the Festival in all my years of going, but I have now. Not one single person has backed it with us. A skinner at the Festival, the stuff of a bookmaker's dream. Sadly, that kills the day off. Not even another well-backed favourite in the shape of Chosen Mate can take the shine off things now and when the 25-1 shot Indefatigable wins the last, that caps off what, eventually, has been a good day. I'm done in, but I've still got Uttoxeter tomorrow and Rasen at Sunday to come. After that....who knows?

If you've enjoyed my articles for the CTCRC this season and have maybe even benefitted from them, please feel free to buy me a coffee at <https://ko-fi.com/davidmassey>. Thankyou for your help.

## John Hales Article

Once we got into March it seemed that the only things to concentrate on was the Festival and the Corona virus. Looking back now on the Festival how lucky we were that it took place and as always provided National Hunt racing of the highest quality. One week later I doubt the Festival would have taken place. For me and my family we regard the Festival as the Holy Grail and went there full of hope that our three runners would produce good performances and all go home safe.

The first day we had Maire Banrigh in the Arkle and she went to the Festival having won her last 6 races. I have watched the race many times and at the time of her fall I was confident she had every chance of finishing in the first three. She was travelling and jumping really well and then stood off to far from a fence. Her back legs caught the top of the fence and down she went. I adore this horse, her temperament

combined with her jumping ability and cruising speed makes her an outstanding racehorse. I have gone over the race many times and I have come to the conclusion that I will not run a horse at the Festival again unless they have already had a run round Cheltenham. After the race the priority was to have the horse examined and we were advised to send her to the veterinary hospital in Newmarket where she would be comfortable and looked after by excellent staff while undergoing a thorough examination.



It was the following day when I heard the news I hoped I would not hear. We were advised that she had a double fracture in the Hock and her leg put in a cast. At that time we were advised by the medical team that it was unlikely she would ever race

again. Last week the cast was taken off and the medical team advised us that the healing of the fractures was excellent and better than expected. The situation now is the cast will be taken off sometime in April at which time we will be advised on her prospects of racing again. We will not take any risks with her and we have already decided that she will be put into foal in 2021 if her racing career is over.



So having had a very disappointing first day we had 2 runners due to run on the Wednesday. Protektorat in the Coral Cup and Politologue in the Champion Chase. We believed Protektorat had a good chance indicated by the Betting. On his return to the parade ring Harry Skelton complained of

the slow pace at the start when our horses strength is to come off a fast pace. However it was a blessing in disguise with the Champion Chase being the next race. Now it was Politologue's chance and would our luck change for the better.

I noticed in the pre parade that Politologue looked very sharp and on his toes. He was wearing a red hood which was to be taken off at the start. This is a new aid to help horses settle and Paul had phoned me the week before saying they recommended that the hood with ear plugs were no longer necessary and advised on use of the red hood. He was spot on and produced Politologue in outstanding shape for the race. What followed was a brilliant exhibition in jumping at speed and Politologue gave very impressive performance to be a worthy winner. I was sorry Altior was not there because I would have loved to have taken him on with that performance. I have great memories of this race which we first won with One

Man followed by Azertyuiop. A very big thank you to all the race goers who gave him a great reception. We had a dinner in the evening when Harry Skelton gave a speech and congratulated Paul in producing the horse in such great racing condition and then revealed details of the main contributor to the success. It was two Magpies that Harry saw going down to the start. I responded by saying thank God there were two of them.



Sadly it looks if racing is over for the time being. For myself I have been told that I am vulnerable to the virus because of my age and the illness I suffered last year. I am now in total isolation and totally bored but thanks to Politologue I watch the race at least 5 times a

day and he keeps winning!!!!

Following Cheltenham I could not resist buying a horse from France who is a 3yo and had one race which he won at Auteuil in Paris. He has similar blood lines to the Gold Cup winner so we have planned to win the big race in 2024!!!! He has passed the vet and comes over to the UK next week. His name is Monmiral and will be owned by Sir Alex Ferguson, Ged Mason, my daughter Lisa and myself. He will go into training with Paul Nicholls. I hope you all are taking all the steps to protect yourselves from this Virus and that we all survive to enjoy many more Cheltenham Festivals.



## January Club Night By David Bishop

### Two Clerks of the Course

Over 70 members attended our January Club Meeting to hear David Massey interview Simon Claisse and Robert Bellamy about their experiences as Clerks of the Course.

Simon Claisse told us that the present going at Cheltenham was “soft, drying out a little” but that he would not be astonished if “we were watering at the Festival”. This was not to be!

Robert Bellamy’s experience has been at the racecourses of Warwick, Stratford, Nottingham and Towcester. Trying to keep decent going at Towcester was a challenge due to clay soil and a sloping course with much water run off, resulting sometimes, in uneven going. Stratford, by contrast, can be irrigated in a day or two so the ground is always even.

Robert confirmed that sadly Towcester will not resume racing. Long negotiations were held by interested parties but they did not

feel they could sign up to the lease requirements. This is a great pity as there are not enough stamina tracks.

One happy incident there was AP’s 4000<sup>th</sup> winner when JP McManus offered to buy everybody present a drink! This put a lot of pressure on the bar staff with a final bill of £11,500 !

Simon reflected on the many changes at Cheltenham since he joined 20 years ago. For owners the quality of the experience has improved markedly. The quality of ground staff is much higher. Horse welfare is much more important now, including moving two troublesome fences. And of course, the £70m building programme.

He said that Cheltenham had taken the initiative to appeal to a much younger audience, with Education Days, Racing to Schools Charity, Junior Jumpers, Pony Racing and strong marketing to parents. All this with no mention of betting!

The job of Clerk of the Course, according to Simon, is not just a matter of growing the grass. The team is all important. Head Groundsman is a key role. The Festival can be lonely for the

Clerk of the Course, wandering about, mobile at the ready. It is a good day when you don’t get noticed – rather like being a football referee!

Cheltenham is trying hard to create a memorable experience for owners. Syndicates are the key to the future and as many members as possible should be allowed into the parade ring.

Discussion moved on to other topics. Some punters grumble that there is too much racing, but it has to be matched to the horse population.

In summer, some people have argued for a 7 or 8 week break from jump racing. Robert B thinks a 4 week break in August/September is ideal. Jockeys need to switch off, but would lose their fitness if the break is too lengthy.

Discussion concluded with horse welfare and the all important whip issue. Robert B feels the current rules are appropriate – especially with the ‘softening’ of the whip. Simon feels that Racing’s image is crucial and that public opinion will compel the authorities to tighten up the rules in the next few years. It was noted that 100,000 people had signed a petition to

take the matter out of the hands of the BHA.

It was agreed that allowing a jockey to keep the race when they had infringed the whip rules was odd.

We also heard about one of the most difficult parts of the Clerk’s job – forecasting to trainers what the going is likely to be on race day. A small minority of trainers are never happy! Simon told the amusing story of a retired Clerk of the Course, Hugo Beavon, who suffered a severe telling off from a lady trainer. Hugo’s response cannot possibly be printed here, so I’ll rely on members who were present to tell others who were not, via ‘Word of mouth’! Everyone agreed that it was a most informative and enjoyable evening, well chaired by David Massey with two very interesting and entertaining interviewees!



# LOCKDOWN

By Jo Davis



Its Tuesday the 31<sup>st</sup> of March and we were supposed to be running a horse at Southwell today, he is called Its For Alan and I say supposed to be running, as we all know the Corona Virus has stopped Great Britain and the world in its tracks.

As a small trainer we are reliant on horses being in work and constantly pushing forwards, hoping our results in the smaller races attracts more owners. I myself have had a dreadful year with the horses being laid low with a virus of their own. This has impacted dreadfully on

the amount of horses and paying owners that I have in my yard. I currently have 3 horses that I need to sell to owners and without racing and better results, I have no outlet for them.

Horses like Alan are my bread and butter, I won with Alan last year but this year we have nursed him through various niggly problems and the virus and I was hoping to be able to pay his owners back for their loyalty with a good run today. Alan is now in a field having a very long rest...



The Corona virus has ensured that myself and many, many other trainers are having to turn horses away and reduce staff's hours or lay them

off. Luckily the government furlough scheme is a god send for people like me, I have 14 horses turned away, the income generated from that won't cover one lot of wages, let alone 3 (if you include mine and I'm only paid £195 a week...).

I count myself as one of the lucky ones, however there are many self-employed people who work within the industry, who may have only started trading in the last year that will go out of business. There are trainers who train flat horses with their two year olds all dressed up and nowhere to go, I know that we all think racing will resume in May, however I am very doubtful this will happen, I would love to be proved wrong though.

I have heard already of trainers being left with horses and owners not paying their bills, unfortunately I feel this may well become a common

occurrence, very concerning. Lastly I would like to spare a thought for the bloodstock industry, there are thousands of horses that have been bred and prepped to sell this spring, from two year old breeze up horses to 3 year old store horses, not to mention the older horses that the trainers move on to make room for the 3 year olds they want to buy.

At this present moment we can only do our best and we all need to stay safe and follow government guidelines to ensure this is all over as quickly as possible.



# Stable Life at Jonjo O'Neill Racing

## By Jo O'Neill

Sadly, I haven't seen Philip, the fat, friendly pheasant, since January 9<sup>th</sup>. He strutted over when I was feeding the field horses and followed me back to the jeep. I suppose, realistically, the odds were never in his favour, but I still look out for him, just in case. I often hope other cock pheasants are him, but they flap away and are always much too skinny.

January 15<sup>th</sup>: John Dina had an amazing day when Django Django won at Newbury. Django jumped much better than last time out and won well. John received a hamper of artisan foodstuffs for being the winning groom, which was a lovely touch.



During evening stables, I'm now back looking after the pens and fields. After being flooded in November, the horses moved up to the main yard. All

the pens have had their stone drainage redone and a thick layer of new woodchip added on top, creating a lovely lingering scent of firs and spruce.

My constant companion is a muddy Freeland, SORN long ago and runs on red diesel. She is damp and breezy, with sodden old feed littering the footwells, pungent from spillages of creosote and mouldy old hay. The rear windscreen is smashed, and one front window is an inch from closure. She is dented with wonky wing mirrors but has one little luxury: a working radio!

The office often fastens notices onto the riding-out board, and there are lots of laminated 'polite notices' around the yard. Some can be classed as 'impolite' and definitely state the obvious; a few are typed up in red ink and capitals! On the door of the drying room, one shouts, 'DOOR MUST BE KEPT CLOSED AT ALL TIMES'. Two in the lower drying room say, 'Please hang up all washed racing kit. Stop leaving it to fester!'; though it's still often left wet and waiting. On the huge industrial washing machine, I've stuck a notice requesting Velcro fastenings to be closed before

washing but, more often than not, I pull everything out and it's all stuck together in a big clump and has to be prised apart before drying.

I've put up notices down the pens, about not leaving rugs on the ground to get soggy. The final straw was when I picked up Dream Berry's under-rug and a rat scuttled out, interrupted from its cosy nap.

Head lad Johnny Kavanagh always says my notices are never read and, regrettably over time, I am beginning to agree with him. Alan Berry, also a head lad, is slightly more philosophical and says that at least everyone is informed.

January 22<sup>nd</sup>: I had a brilliant day at Warwick when Minella Rocco won the hunter chase. I thought Paul Nicholls' runner was a certainty, so I didn't have any expectations. Aine O'Conner flew over especially from Ireland to ride and was so lovely: willowy tall, slim and with a wide, beautiful smile. Anyway, the Nicholls runner gave his owner-rider a horrible time and eventually pulled up. Turning for home, Rocco looked beaten and was behind over the final fence. Yet, he stayed on, winning by seven lengths.

Waiting on the chute, I felt rather emotional, hiding it behind the sweat rug for his hindquarters.



He is a yard legend: our last Festival winner, second in a Gold Cup; a big, beautiful horse with a lovely character. Aine had an even bigger smile. "You must love him," she said, and I think she loved him a bit too. I was given a Jockey Club Warwick baseball cap and a packet of Polo mints and was overjoyed when Matty Gill and Rachel McMahon (who'd come supporting on their Wednesday afternoon off) came into the winner's photograph. On a personal level, I was especially chuffed because it meant that all 'my' horses have won – this was only the third season ever that this had happened to me.

Down the Plough Inn that evening, Alan summed it up: "It's not the 14-1 for the Foxhunters, it's just the fact he's won again." The whole table of us merry staff happily toasted that. I lifted my G&T in total agreement and celebration. Rocco's win meant a lot to us – he means a lot to us.

I've always said that I wouldn't ride Rocco but, that

Saturday, he was by my name! I was delighted – even more so when he didn't buck me off! He IS huge, his ears very far away.

Matty won the Employee of the Month for his hard work riding Annie Mc. Annie was unbeaten in two chases at this point, and Matty rides her daily. Matty has been here since 2018, improving all the time with his riding, getting out his 'pointing licence this winter. His horses include Tedham, Generation Gap, Wasdell Dundalk and Flight Deck.



Matty receiving his bottle of Champagne from Jonjo

February 1<sup>st</sup>: Rocco won again at Wetherby, beating the reigning Foxhunters champion Hazel Hill. It was a skilful ride by Derrick O'Connor. I could hardly watch but Rocco powered over the finish, and I jumped on Harrison Day. I had cantered Rocco the day before and he had been so lazy, obviously mocking me! I felt incredibly proud. Before the race, he had been a nightmare to plait, holding his head so high I had to stand on two upturned

buckets. Afterwards, he was wired, running round the stable, only stopping to listen intently to the commentary.

After the seemingly endless grey, wet days, the drop in temperature caused frosty, silvered mornings bookended by beautiful sunrises and sunsets. The skies, a watercolour wash of vivid colours, that no camera could do justice.

February 8<sup>th</sup>: I drove two runners to Warwick accompanied by Morgan Roach. Pop The Cork (Corky) finished second and March Is On (Marty) let the side down by coming in eleventh! In Uttoxeter, Clondaw Promise (also looked after by Morgan) came second and Darsi In The Park won. This was the first English winner for a delighted Rachel.

At Newbury, Jonjo Junior won the Denman Chase on Native River. We felt proud of our young but talented jockey.

February 9<sup>th</sup>: Storm Ciara halted Exeter. It was my weekend on so I did my usual chores down the fields, which was very muddy and windy. It felt like I was fighting against a tornado. Luckily, I avoided the worst of the slanting rain at lunchtime!

After AJ O'Neill got unseated at Doncaster off Mustmeetlady, Alan and conditional jockey Ed Austin put all the spare neck straps in the

tack room on his bridle. Ed is a joker, vivacious and amusing. He worked previously worked for Dan Skelton and Ian Williams. He's introduced a new tradition to the yard: whenever someone falls off, they must bring in a cake. This is fabulous, and enjoyed by all, except maybe AJ who, at one time, owed five cakes!

February 20<sup>th</sup>: There was torrential rain at Huntingdon causing many lakes in the stable yard. Some stables were cordoned off, having flooded. This set the precedent for the new few weeks – grey days with lots of rain that caused flooding.



February 21<sup>st</sup>: I drove to the evening meeting at Wolverhampton with Ben Haig and Itoldyoutobackit (Ginge). As I've always worked primarily with jump horses, I worried about Ginge; going into the stalls, his Monty Roberts' stall blanket, requesting a late stall entry and speaking to the starter. The starter was a gentleman and gave me clear instructions. Ginge is well-mannered in the stable yard and

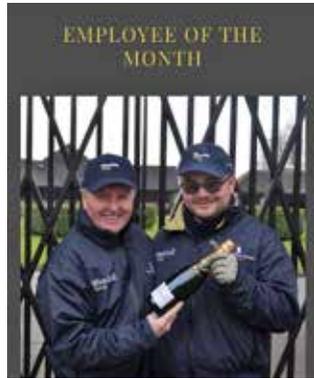
to lead up but must be saddled in the stables.

Under the silvery floodlights, I carried the heavy stalls blanket round to the start. Ginge walked happily round wearing it. I watched in awe of the stalls handlers, who literally lifted four other runners into the stalls. It was clear that they are the unsung heroes of racing; there was ten of them and all worked so hard. They blindfolded Ginge but he reared up, shedding blanket and the jockey whipped off the blindfold. In the end, the handlers hoisted him into the stalls, working against his stubborn, locked legs. With a rear reminiscent of a BMX wheelie, Ginge leapt out with the others as the stalls clattered open. "What a bunch of \*\*\*\*\*, including yours" someone mumbled, and I couldn't disagree. I love my Flat racing, but that night was stressful.



February 27<sup>th</sup>: There was a surprise covering of snow. We rode our lots, dodging snowballs flicked up by their hooves. This

snow was easily tolerated as it had melted by lunchtime.



Florin Bogdan Enescu won the next Employee of the Month. I personally nominated him as he'd been so helpful at the pens and fields. He goes there most mornings to muck out and ferries hay and straw bales across. Florin, a friend of John's from Romania, has had a brilliant season with 'his' Maypole Class, Lock's Corner and Tegerek all winning once and Garry Claremont winning twice.

March 10<sup>th</sup>: The first day of the Festival started with me driving three runners up to Sedgfield, accompanied by Morgan and Megan Petrie. The day was chilly but sunny. It was easy to feel distanced from the other meeting, but I watched the races on the big screen. After two were placed and a best turned out, it wasn't a bad day.

Much to my excitement, I went to the Friday of the Festival. It's such a special place, with

unbeatable atmosphere, and I felt very proud to lead up Rocco in the Foxhunter's. The sun shone, as yellow as the Gold Cup winning colours. Whilst we were in the pre-parade, I heard the fantastic Al Boum Photo win the big one for the second year running – a horse I had picked to do so. The cheers were deafening thunder, the applause pulsed. I felt privileged to have been present that day, as I had been at Tiger Roll's second Grand National back in April.

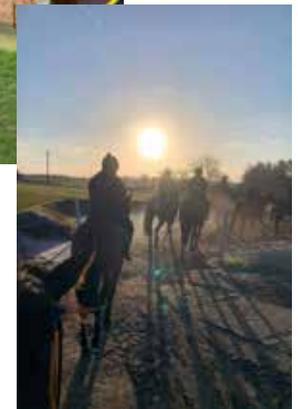


Rocco was an absolute gent in the packed paddock – and he finished fifth. At one point, he looked like he was coming with a rattle, but he couldn't make up the ground. Yet, he finished safely and made me happy. Afterwards, he was spooking at the mist fans, so he was more than ok.

There was another reason why I felt chuffed to be there that day – it was a decade since I had led up Imperial Commander when he won his Gold Cup. A few amazing memories resurfaced.

I was incredibly lucky to have looked after him and I'll never forget those days; simply I'll never forget Nelly.

Only two days later, with the cancellation of this year's Grand National, we were all left wondering how the Festival occurred at all.



## **Fergal O'Brien and Guests Evening Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> February 2020**



After a recent visit to the new Ravenswell yard earlier in the month, attendees at the February club night enjoyed an entertaining evening with Fergal O'Brien and team; Sally Randall, Fern O'Brien, Connor Brace, and Liam Harrison.

The evening was chaired by Edward Gillespie who opened the evening by cutting straight to the chase in asking young fourteen-year-old Fern, her father's worst habits. Fern didn't have to think too hard and was adamant that it was her father's terrible swearing! She did, however, remark on his better qualities including

his fantastic ability to educate riders and communicate with owners which Fergal has often been well recognised for.

Tipperary born Fergal became interested in racing from a young age following the footsteps of his two older brothers David and Brian. Although not from a racing background, Fergal remarked on his father's passion for racing which helped encourage him to pursue a career in the industry. He moved to the UK, and after a stint in the racing school, eventually found himself under the tutelage of the legendary Captain Tim Forster. Fergal acknowledged the Captain as a fantastic trainer who had a great passion for three-mile chasers yet a terrible intolerance for jockeys who he branded as 'prima donnas'. Fergal has fond memories from three and a half years at Tim's Letcombe Brook base included

celebrating winners such as Dublin Flyer and Cherry Hero although also remarked on the dreaded late evening visits from the Duchess of Westminster who would have to have at least three gin and tonics before inspecting her horses!

Fergal's intentions to be a jockey were short-lived after he reminisced about his first ride in a two-mile hurdle race at Ludlow. After getting run away with down to the start, he asked for advice from one of the senior jockeys down at the start and was provided with the advice "stay the f\*\*k away from me!". Fergal laughed that even reminding himself of the experience frightened him and urged Edward to move on from the subject. The next step in his career was joining the Nigel Twiston-Davies team, initially as a stable lad before progressing to run a satellite yard. Fergal enjoyed successes at the Naunton base such as Imperial

Commander and Khyber Kim before being approached by Chris Coley to set up his own operation.

Chris's confidence in Fergal's ability encouraged him to commence training. Initially, after a stint at Timmy Murphy's Kildaragh Stud, Fergal moved back to Naunton to rent Nigel's top yard. Between the winners supplied by the two trainers, they could have notched up a Champion Trainer title with more winners recorded in a season than Paul Nicholls. Earlier last year Fergal was introduced to Rupert and Nikki Lowe and between them, this has resulted in the establishment of the Ravenswell base which so far has supplied the team with 57 winners this season. Fergal accredited much of his success to his fantastic team and next to take the stage was his partner and assistant trainer, Sally Randall.

Sally informed the audience of

her early passion for horses and spent time working with an event rider before joining racehorse trainer John O'Shea. After finishing a horse management course at Hartpury college, Sally joined the army where she eventually was given the opportunity to have a race ride in the Grand Military at Sandown. Sally reminisced about walking the track with her late father, who looked at the fences and commented, "Gee, this is a bit different". Sally finished second and returned to win the race the following year for her regiment with the winner consequently trained by Fergal. She became the first female rider to win the race and laughed that she only won because she disregarded Fergal's riding instructions. Next, Edward was keen to quiz Fergal's daughter Fern on her introduction to the pony racing ranks. Fern has been racing since 2016 and laughed at her consistent ability to miss the

start with her father highlighting that on her first race she was too busy gossiping to her best friend. Despite this, Fern has displayed her ability by winning multiple pony races since including winners at Cheltenham and Ascot. The panel discussed the benefits of pony racing including the ability for riders to experience the fundamentals of a race day in an effort to minimise anxiety on an official race day.



After a short interval, the panel was joined by Connor Brace (conditional jockey) and Liam Harrison (amateur jockey). Welshman Connor became involved in racing through his grandfather. He has already made quite an impact on

the racecourse winning 35 winners from 250 rides. Fergal attributed some of this success to Connor's tremendous ability to stay cool under pressure. The trainer remarked on Connor's first ride at Bangor-on-Dee where despite most jockeys being full of nerves riding for a new trainer, Connor slept the whole way and they had a job to wake him up!

Liam Harrison has recently joined the Ravenswell team and has already ridden 7 winners from 50 racecourse rides. This includes his first ride at Cheltenham in October last year where he enjoyed success aboard Petite Power. This day also supplied Connor and Paddy Brennan with a winner, and Fergal with his first treble. Among the panel, this was cited as the best day's racing as a team.

Fergal made a big effort to highlight that Ravenswell operates so well due to

his fantastic team. He also commented on the importance of horses being mentally as well as physically fit. This is also consistent for jockeys and Liam and Connor spoke about jockey coaching being highly valuable to them as they progress in their careers.

With all roads now leading to Cheltenham, Fergal spoke about his festival week hopefuls which include Champagne Wells (Coral Cup), Goodbye Dancer (Conditionals race) and Brief Ambition and Ask a Honey Bee expected to line up in the Champion Bumper. The evening was very informative and enjoyed by all present and we wish Fergal and team continued success in the future.

By Fiona Dowling

Editor: Fiona was a member of CTCRC committee but has a new job which has taken her away. Many thanks to Fiona for all her input.

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