

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

David Carr tracks down conditional jockey turned sports therapist **Nathan Willmington**

### Hard graft paved way for fitness role

SAY not the struggle nought availeth. That is the message from Nathan Willmington to those desperately trying to make a living in racing, striving to get rides as they battle with the scales.

The former conditional jockey, who is now a sports therapist with an Olympic medallist on his books, certainly believes hard work never did him any harm.

He says: "The big thing about coming from racing is that it is tough, you have to dedicate every part of your life to it."

"Moving into an industry like this, where I am self-employed, I have to give a lot of hours to the cause. Whereas a lot of people come through from normal jobs and don't understand the dedication you have to put in to get something going, from racing you do because that is never easy."

It was never easy for Dorset native Willmington, who got into the sport via friendship with permit-holder David Chesney, worked for Toby Balding while at school – he also had spells with Nicky Henderson and



**Name** Nathan Willmington

**Age** 40

**When at large** Rode as conditional jockey 1993-2000

**Best moment** Winning on Billingsgate at Worcester for David Chesney, because he had been such a mentor and guide to my career

Andy Turnell – and ditched an original plan to join the army.

But the toughness of his existence opened his eyes to a possible future career path.

"I was very tall for a jump jockey and always struggled with my weight," he says.

"I wasn't the greatest jockey in the world, so if I could be fitter than anybody at least I would have a chance. That naturally led me into

wanting to help other people in that side of things."

Which led to a distance-learning course at Luton University, set up via the Jockeys Employment and Training Scheme, during his last two years in the saddle. "I tried my best but I got to the age of 24 and I knew it wasn't going to happen, so that's when I started doing my course," he says.

"My last ride was the day before my 26th birthday – I was going to lose my conditional tag and I wasn't going to keep on with a full licence."

Willmington eventually became fitness coordinator for West Dorsetshire County Council before retraining in sports therapy.

"I now work for myself from Weymouth to Dorchester and see a variety of different people, including a lot of athletes," he says.

"I had a two-year contract with the Italian national team leading up to and through the Olympics. And I also looked after Pavlos Kontides, who won the silver medal in the laser sailing for the Cypriot team."

Reflecting on life as a jockey, Willmington says: "I had a fantastic time. Racing was buzzing then, especially in Lambourn – we had Remittance Man, Travado and all those sort of horses when I was at Nicky Henderson's."

Now an accomplished triathlete, he adds: "I haven't been racing for a year and I haven't sat on a horse for nearly a year. I used to ride out but I have been so busy with work."



**Bobby Beevers:** "I see myself as a chatty person – I'm very talkative"

## YOUNG GUNS

In our series on people taking their initial steps in the racing industry, David Carr talks to **Bobby Beevers**

**J**ULIAN WILSON he ain't. But so what? There are as many ways to broadcast on racing as there are to skin the proverbial feline. The likes of Matt Chapman and Derek Thompson have shown that cerebral intellectualism is not always the way to go. Infectious energy and enthusiasm can do just as much to sell the sport.

Step forward Bobby Beevers, the less-than-retiring South Yorkshire phenomenon who has burst on to the digital airwaves this summer – and could be the 'big fella' in 2024.

"A few people have said I am a young Tommo and I think that is a compliment," he says. "Derek is an experienced racing broadcaster and commentator. He talks racing with me on air and he's said I remind him of himself 30 years ago."

If Beevers makes it as a TV presenter, it would certainly be a unique career path for a man who has been in thrall to the sport since he was taken racing as a virtual babe in arms by his father.

Nick Luck didn't start out by studying performing arts at Rotherham College of Art & Technology, but Beevers says: "I acted when I was younger and I really enjoyed it. It gave me a huge confidence boost and taught me different ways of speaking and how to project."

Nor did Clare Balding tour Gulliver's Theme Parks hosting the Cbeebies 'Zingzillas' show alongside Drum, Panzee, Tang and Zak.

"My passion was always horseracing. I was waiting for a lucky break," Beevers says, and he ended up making his own luck, volunteering to cover racing at Doncaster for hospital radio.

"I paid to get into the County Stand," he says. "I used to find a quiet spot and do my reporting on my mobile phone."

Paid work for the Betfred audio

### New Tommo has the spirit to succeed

**Name** Bobby Beevers **Age** 28

**Job** Horseracing correspondent for Radio Yorkshire

**Best moment** Working at Doncaster – it's my favourite racecourse and it's great to be there reporting live on the meetings I used to go to with my dad.

service and online broadcaster Bet Racing Nation followed, before Beevers got the call to cover racing when Radio Yorkshire started up in the spring.

Since then listeners have been treated to the sound of a go-anywhere, interview-anyone correspondent who is never short of a well-projected word, or several.

"I see myself as quite a chatty person, I'm very talkative," admits a man who still cannot quite believe his luck. "Every Saturday I'm at a different racecourse. It's my passion and I'll go wherever they send me."

Being at Goodwood on Stewards' Cup day was particularly memorable and emotional.

"I went with my dad in 2007, then in the week of the race in 2008 we found he didn't have long left," Beevers says.

"Stewards' Cup day in 2008 was the last racing I saw with him as he died in the early hours of the Sunday morning."

"To be there broadcasting live this year was incredibly poignant. I'd like to think he was looking down with a huge smile on his face."

## I GOTTA HORSE

Gordon Woodall tells Lydia Symonds about Racing Post Trophy hope **Celestial Path**

### Latecomer aiming for the stars

**Horse** Celestial Path **Wins** 2

**Owner** Gordon Woodall **Age** 80

**Best moment** When he won at York, just because of the manner in which he won

GORDON WOODALL had a lifelong ambition to own a racehorse and finally at the ripe old age of 75 he achieved his goal when he purchased his first horse, Dark Oasis.

It is not often that someone joins the ownership ranks so late in life and even more extraordinary to find they may have a potential star on their hands. But that is the happy position for Woodall, now 80, with his unbeaten colt Celestial Path.

Woodall, who had accumulated money investing in stocks and investment trusts, was able to put serious funds into his new hobby. He purchased Celestial Path for €110,000 in October last year and sent him to Sir Mark Prescott, having been a fan of the trainer over the years.

Woodall's principal hope was to win a race at York, where his passion for racing began, and Prescott achieved that for him when Celestial Path won a 7f maiden on his debut in July.

"When he won at York I was stunned because he sort of stumbled



**Gordon Woodall congratulates jockey Luke Morris after the victory of Racing Post Trophy contender Celestial Path at Haydock last month**

out of the stalls and was last for the first three furlongs, and then he stormed through the field. I was speechless," the owner says.

That was only the start. Celestial Path scored again on his second start, brushing aside his rivals in a mile Listed contest at Haydock, and inquiries were made for him.

"I was offered a decent amount of money, a lot more than I bought him for," says Woodall. "But I thought I bought the horse to run in races and he might turn out to be a good horse, and I wanted the enjoyment and excitement of him doing well."

Woodall's enjoyment of Celestial Path is heightened by the fact that it is shared with his children – Christine, Stephen and Michael – and his nine grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren.

"Going racing to watch him run is something I can do with the whole family. My granddaughter Olivia was at Haydock when he won and it was lovely."

That continues a family interest going back many decades. "My father used to take me to the odd race meeting when I was growing up in the forties," says Woodall. "He used to have a bet and I sometimes put bets on for him and over time my interest in racing grew."

The interest level will go up a few more notches later this month, with Celestial Path on course for the Group 1 Racing Post Trophy at Doncaster.

"This has been beyond my wildest dreams," says Woodall. "It puts a spring in my step to see him run so well and always putting in such determined performances."

### Q&A 'I want to progress and work my way up the ladder'

**What is the best bit about being in racing?** It's a fantastic sport and the best bit is how close you can get to the action.

**And the worst?** There isn't one. Not even the driving – it comes with the job and when I'm doing a long journey I'm excited as I'm on the way down to report on Glorious Goodwood or up to Scotland for the Ayr Gold Cup.

**What are your ambitions?** To keep progressing and work my way up the ladder. I hope one day to broadcast on At The Races or Racing UK.

**What can racing do to attract more youngsters?** Having more coverage is key, but having pop stars and bands definitely helps to attract young people.