

## WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Newmarket-based **Mark Baird** tells David Milnes about his move into landscaping

### Former rider digs out a fresh career

THESE days the only turf that former useful Flat apprentice Mark Baird worries about is the stuff he lays in other people's gardens.

Since having the last of more than 1,000 rides in 2001, Baird has turned a part-time interest in landscaping into a full-blown business with the help of the Jockeys Employment & Training Scheme (Jets) and is busier than ever in his new venture, which is based at his home near Newmarket.

Baird, who partnered 57 winners domestically plus two abroad in a career that spanned a decade, started out near his home town of Hamilton after leaving school but soon had his first taste of the bright lights of Newmarket.

"My first job was with John Wilson at Ayr and he sent me to the British Racing School in Newmarket," he says. "I enjoyed it there and, after a brief spell at a jumping yard, I joined Mark Johnston at Middleham."

Baird soon had his first ride under his belt courtesy of his fellow Scot and it was not long before he rode his first winner. "It was competitive for rides up there at the time with the likes of



**Name** Mark Baird **Age** 39

**When at large** 1992-2001

**Finest moment** Winning five on the trot with useful staying filly Sweetness Herself in 1996

Dean McKeown and Tyrone Williams around, but I managed to ride a winner on just my sixth ride on a 50-1 shot, Luks Akura, at Carlisle in 1992."

Despite the breakthrough, Baird was soon on his way back to Newmarket, where he hoped to find more opportunities after landing a job with Mick Ryan. "I struck up a good relationship with a fast-improving stayer, Sweetness Herself, in my time at Mick's, winning five on the trot

with her in 1996. That helped to put me on the map. I also rode her to be second in the Northumberland Plate the following year."

Baird made the odd foray to the continent and won the Bratislava Derby on the Richard Hannon-trained Powder River in 1997 but the following year, with his 3lb claim soon to disappear, opportunities began to dry up.

"I had started a family and wanted a bit more security, so I got a job riding out for Godolphin but was soon made redundant," says Baird. "After that I rode out for Sir Michael Stoute but by then I had started doing landscaping in the afternoons."

With the help of Jets, M Baird Diggerhire & Landscaping was launched full-time two years ago and the former jockey has not looked back. Baird, who is married to Emma and has three children, India, Rhys and newborn Amelia, says: "I rang Jets and they sent me on an excavator and digger course that would have cost me £3,000 but they paid for 80 per cent of it, which was a great help to get me going."

Usually quiet in winter, Baird has been busier than ever in recent weeks. "With all the storms everyone's fence seems to have blown over, so I have been flat out repairing them. It's a labour of love really. I would urge anyone looking to get out of racing and do something else to get in touch with Jets as they will put you on the right road."



**Mendip Express: set for final festival prep at Newbury next month**

## CHELTENHAM FOCUS

Andrew Dietz asks trainer Harry Fry about his hopes for fast-improving novice chaser **Mendip Express**

AS EDUCATIONS go, Mendip Express has had the equine equivalent of an Oxbridge degree course.

Schooled in the art of jumping by point-to-point professor Richard Barber from the age of three, the now eight-year-old has supplemented his learning by gaining a wealth of experience to aid his chase career.

At the start of the season he graduated from point-to-points to racing under rules and the early signs suggest he has the ability to go a long way in his chasing career.

Taking into account his pointing record, Mendip Express, who had one run over hurdles for Paul Nicholls as a five-year-old, has won his last nine races and has been beaten only once when completing.

"He was always going to be a chaser and, rather than waste time over hurdles, he's been given time to develop and strengthen and gain valuable experience," says trainer Harry Fry.

Encouragingly Mendip Express has improved with each start this season, building on novice wins at Wetherby and Bangor when decisively defying top weight in an ultra-competitive handicap at Cheltenham on New Year's Day.

It was a landmark first success at the track for Fry and one he is keen on trying to repeat in March, in either the National Hunt Chase or the RSA Chase. "At this stage we're leaning towards the National Hunt Chase and we'll make our minds up after he runs at Newbury on Denman Chase day," he says.

Off his revised official rating of 147, one of the handicaps – possibly the Festival Handicap Chase, which has a rich history of going to a progressive stayer – could prove tempting but you can understand why the four-miler,

### Point-to-point graduate quick to climb ranks

**Horse** Mendip Express **Age** 8

**Trainer** Harry Fry

**Festival target** National Hunt Chase or RSA Chase

**Form** F/111 **Racing Post Rating** 156

for which Mendip Express is the clear favourite with some firms, is the preferred option.

Regular rider Will Biddick, who has built up a great rapport with Mendip Express, would be taking on his peers in a contest confined to amateurs and the extra distance, and likely slower pace, could help his mount find that crucial rhythm.

Much depends on next month's weather-permitting outing at Newbury (he will go straight to the festival if the going is too soft) in the 3m novice chase, a race previously won by the mighty Denman, but you get the impression something special would need to happen for the RSA to emerge as the target.

Just for part-owner Paul Barber to consider replicating the route he took with Denman as a novice in 2007 is testament to how far Mendip Express has come in a fairly short space of time.

Fry adds: "We're taking one race at a time but he seems to be on an upward curve and hopefully that will continue."

## I GOTTA HORSE

Syndicate member **Jon Plant** talks to David Milnes about **First Experience**

### Initial shock followed by pair of wins

**Horse** First Experience **Wins** 2

**Owner** Fitorfat Racing and Guy Carstairs

**Best moment** Winning twice at Wolverhampton this winter

AS NEW owners in the racing world, it couldn't have started much worse for members of the Fitorfat Racing syndicate and friend Guy Carstairs when First Experience finished tailed off on her debut at Warwick in October.

The Rae Guest-trained filly has since made amends by winning twice at Wolverhampton and her hat-trick bid could fall on a significant if potentially troublesome date. "It could be that the next suitable race for First Experience is on Valentine's Day at Wolverhampton," says syndicate member Jon Plant, "but we don't think our wives and girlfriends are too keen on it."

Plant and four pals teamed up to form the syndicate after meeting through their jobs in financial services. He explains: "A couple of us are from near Birmingham and the others from Surrey, but we used to meet up at the races every two or three months through work and one day at Newbury we decided to get involved.



**First Experience and her happy connections after her latest success**

"One guy already had a share in a horse and put us in touch with Rae Guest, who said he had this filly for sale for £10,000. We were struggling to raise that amount and went back to Rae with £5,000 and the training fees. Fair play to him, he took it and took a share himself and suggested we name her First Experience as that was what it was for many of us."

After plenty of work on the Newmarket gallops, First Experience was finally entered for her debut. Plant says: "Loads of us went to see her at Warwick, after which we thought we had bought a dud. It was embarrassing. She wouldn't go in the stalls and when she did she fell out and was beaten over 50 lengths."

That run was too bad to be true according to her trainer and First Experience was soon on her way to renowned horse whisperer Gary Witherford. "Thankfully we found out

she has a fragile temperament and hates the stalls. If they rattle in the wind it frightens her," says Plant. "Gary did a good job and when she came back Rae entered her in a maiden at Wolverhampton in November."

The Witherford magic had obviously worked. "She went into the stalls like a dream and we couldn't believe it when she came late to win at 12-1," says Plant.

Following another disappointment, when it was windy at Lingfield, First Experience returned to Wolverhampton this month to turn over hotpot Bint Malyana in a 7f handicap.

"We don't really know how good she is," says Plant, "but she has taken that race really well and it could be that she runs on Valentine's Day. We'd better see if there are any spare tables in their restaurant."