

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Jon Lees catches up with Scottish National-winning jockey **Keith Mercer**

Injury pushes keen student back to books

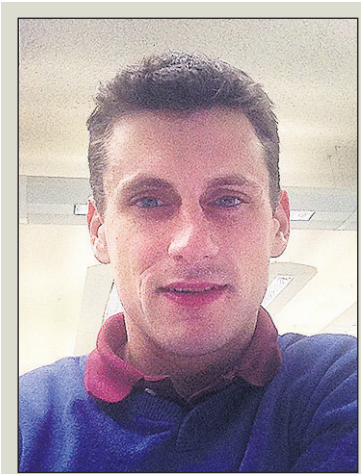
HE won the 2005 Scottish Grand National and rode a Grade 1 winner at the Punchestown festival, but now Keith Mercer is aiming for another kind of first.

Mercer, once one of the most promising young riders in his sport, is now a mature student, studying for an accountancy degree at Teesside University in Middlesbrough.

After a catalogue of injury setbacks he was forced to give up race-riding two years ago, eventually accepting that another fall could put him at risk of longer-term damage.

"I had a fall two or three weeks before my 30th birthday," he says. "At the time I had a broken collarbone, a broken shoulder and I shattered my hand. My hand had to be reconstructed with about seven bits of metal inserted. I tried to get over the injury but as time went on it was the hand that was the problem. It wasn't as strong as it needed to be."

"My doctor was worried what the long-term effects might be if I injured my hand in another fall. For a long time I intended to come back. I rode out for a bit, found it wasn't strong



Name Keith Mercer **Age** 32

When at large 2003-12

Best moment Winning the 2005 Scottish Grand National on Joes Edge

enough, took a few months and then rode out again. The time off wasn't enjoyable and it came to a point where I had to do something.

"It got to August and I felt I couldn't go on not having a proper focus. I chose Teesside University because it was local and I had no time to relocate. I found the accountancy course and started in September last year. It wasn't a long-term plan but I've really enjoyed it and it's something I'm interested in."

Mercer had come to race-riding late, having stayed in school until he was 18 to secure the qualifications that earned him a place at university, which he put off after spending a summer with Henrietta Knight.

He extended his time in the saddle to make a career of riding. As stable jockey to Ferdy Murphy he rode Joes Edge to victory in the Scottish National and Carlys Quest to win the Champion Stayers Hurdle at Punchestown. In all he rode 194 winners but was blighted by a series of injuries after he returned from a double leg fracture in 2010.

"I miss parts of being a jockey," he says. "I had falls but you're looked after when you're off injured. I would have liked to have carried on a bit longer but I have no regrets. I won some big races and really enjoyed it."

"I've just started my second year at university. The first-year results showed I'm on track for a first. I have six hours of lectures and six hours of seminars every week but getting a good degree is about the work you put in, possibly even more so than intelligence."

"I don't know what part of accountancy I'll end up in because I have only done one year, which has been fairly generic. If you put my head on the block I would be looking towards financial accounting but company law interests me too. I could take a year out and do an internship, which might help give me more of an idea."



David Jeffreys: "I hope to train myself but I haven't set any deadlines"

YOUNG GUNS

In our series on people taking their initial steps in the racing industry, Lydia Symonds talks to **David Jeffreys**

STUDYING at Cirencester Agricultural College, in the heart of the Cotswolds, makes it hard to ignore the racing world and David Jeffreys threw himself into the sport during his time there.

"I went racing a lot, I rode in point-to-points and I lived in a racing-obsessed house," he says. "From the outside looking in, racing is an attractive sport, with an amazing social life and way of life, so I suppose that was the initial attraction."

Initially, it was only a hobby but Jeffreys later began to think about job opportunities and he has now worked as an assistant trainer for six years. After stints with Rose Dobbin and Charlie Mann, he is in his second season with Charlie Longsdon.

"I hope to train myself but I haven't set any deadlines," says Jeffreys. "It's difficult to set a timescale when you're working for someone like Charlie, when you're having such a good time and learning so much."

From a young age horses were always on the agenda but, although his uncles Johnny Jeffreys and Richard Landale are the chairman and managing director at Kelso racecourse, he was more familiar with the hunting field.

"Both my parents hunted like mad. Where I'm from in Northumberland hunting and racing go hand in hand."

Having ridden in point-to-points throughout his university days, he returned to Northumberland with plans to make racing his career and quickly landed the job as Dobbin's assistant. After two years there, and with nine point-to-point wins under his belt, he moved on to Charlie

From college to practical experience

Name David Jeffreys **Age** 28

Job Assistant trainer with Charlie Longsdon

Best moment Riding my first point-to-point winner, a horse called Sir Homo. I got absolutely bolted with for two circuits – great fun

Mann's yard in Lambourn.

"I didn't think I was experienced enough for a job like that," he says. "But I went to meet Charlie for a ten-minute chat and ended up riding out a couple of lots, and after that he offered me the job. I enjoyed Charlie's and I will forever be in his debt because of the opportunities he gave me."

After two years with Mann he had the chance to join Longsdon. "At the time everyone was talking about Charlie Longsdon and everyone is still talking about him as potentially the next big trainer. It was an opportunity that couldn't be missed."

He hopes to stay with Longsdon for another two seasons at least and feels he has time on his side. "If opportunities are there right now that will make my career better in the long term, then I don't see the hurry."

I GOTTA HORSE

Jon Lees talks to **Carl Hodgson**, who is hoping for more success with **Shelford**

Magical days interspersed with sadness

Horse Shelford **Wins** 3

Owner Carl Hodgson **Age** 46

Best moment Le Bacardy finishing second on the Friday of the Scottish Grand National meeting and winning the Listed chase the following day



Carl Hodgson (third left) and Shelford at Chepstow last Saturday

THE experience of owning racehorses can be punctuated with as many downs as ups. Carl Hodgson has gone through both in 2014 but approaches the end of the year with an impressive winners-to-runners ratio.

Hodgson, from Leicester, has a 60 per cent strike-rate on the Flat and 25 per cent over jumps, with Shelford recording the owner's 13th win of the year when landing a novice hurdle at Chepstow last weekend.

Hodgson, whose company Signfab is the country's leading trade-only sign manufacturer, was pointed towards racehorse ownership by Walter Swinburn. He now has five horses in training.

"I bought my first share with Walter Swinburn eight years ago," he says. "He was relatively fresh in the training ranks and he was always a hero of mine when he was a jockey. He was advertising syndicates in the Racing Post."

"I started with a 12th share, then a quarter share and then I got the bug and bought one outright. One became two but I was more a National Hunt fan and I am now stuck and happy with Tony Carroll and Dan Skelton."

Skelton now trains Shelford, who was originally trained by John Oxx for the Australian billionaire Lloyd Williams as a possible Melbourne Cup contender. The five-year-old has also had spells with Carroll and Mick Appleby.

"Shelford was relatively tricky to train," says Hodgson. "He didn't act on Tony's gallop, so we decided to find him a surface that would work. He went to Mick Appleby and had a successful period there, but Shelford was always bought for hurdling and when Dan began his training career I couldn't miss that. His next race will be the Persian War Novices' Hurdle at Chepstow."

Waving, another formerly trained

by Oxx, won five races on the trot for Hodgson in February this year but on his hurdling debut at Taunton in April he fell and broke his neck. Another recent recruit, Casey Ryback, suffered a fatal injury on his bumper debut in August.

"It's been a rollercoaster year," says Hodgson. "We've had two sad days but some magical ones as well. I had my first Listed win with Le Bacardy at Ayr and Great Link has won on the Flat, over hurdles and over fences this year."

He also had a hand in the recruitment of Caspian Prince, Carroll's money-spinning sprinter who won this year's Dash at Epsom on Derby day.

"I introduced my brother-in-law, Stephen Louch, to Tony's yard. He had never been into horses but enjoyed days out with us. He asked Tony to buy him a horse and he got Caspian Prince."

Q&A 'The best bit is the camaraderie and way of life'

Best bit about working in racing? The way of life and the camaraderie and I'm so lucky to be surrounded by such a great team at Charlie's, learning from Charlie and his head lad Alan Roache.

And the worst? There's too much racing. There's no respite from it at times, it's all the time, every day. The prize-money would be better and the fields would be bigger if there was less racing.

What are your ambitions? Keep learning, become a trainer and even hunt a pack of hounds.

What can racing do to attract a younger audience? It's not an accessible sport. Going into schools, using the famous people in racing like AP McCoy, would drive the sport in the right direction.