

NEWS FOCUS

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flipping and I just see it as a help to me.”

It has long been regarded as a form of help. Rewind through the decades and some of the sport's most famous jockeys, then also able to use dehydrating diuretics, habitually made themselves sick in order to make a weight. A number of leading Flat riders, who compete in and win some of the sport's biggest races, still do so with varying degrees of regularity.

There is nothing in racing's rules to say they should not, but there is nevertheless some embarrassment among those who flip or have flipped. That sense of shame is not felt by those who smoke or spend an eternity in a hot sauna or bath in order to lose the odd pound.

“It's a real challenge to get a handle on the frequency of flipping,” says BHA chief medical adviser Dr Jerry Hill. “It's something jockeys won't necessarily declare themselves, although if you talk to them most know someone who is doing it. Whether it's one in 100 or one in ten, we don't know.”

A survey carried out by the Professional Jockeys Association throws a little more light on the extent of flipping. Of the 48 riders prepared to answer if they were active flippers, 12 said yes.

From that, we should not extrapolate that 25 per cent of all jockeys are vomiting away their food intake. In Britain, the PJA believes this is a problem linked predominantly to southern-based Flat riders with apprentices increasingly following the lead of certain senior colleagues. In Ireland, a jockey coach describes flipping as “a huge issue”.

The irony is this growth in flipping, real or perceived, comes at a time when the sport is offering more nutritional advice and support to jockeys than ever before.

The mechanics of flipping and the many side effects

What follows may not make for easy reading. It is important to understand, nonetheless.

Jockeys flip because it works. It can have negative side effects, but for those who need to reduce their weight in order to fulfil a riding commitment, it is viewed as highly effective. Indeed, in the US it is so accepted that many weighing rooms contain a special heaving bowl, into which jockeys vomit. That is not the case here, but that does not mean changing room toilets are not used for the same purpose.

There are jockeys who flip only when needing to ride at a particularly light weight. For others, it is a daily requirement, with one insider suggesting certain individuals can repeat the process five or six times a day.

To make flipping easier, jockeys eat food that is not stodgy, like curry, rice or sweets, often accompanied by large quantities of fizzy drink. Some will gorge themselves, as a key attraction of flipping is that by rapidly feasting, the brain is made to believe the stomach has been satisfied, even if the consumed food is brought back up very quickly. Indeed, jockeys do need to act quickly and will seek to make themselves sick within around 30 minutes of eating.

As such, some when travelling will eat at one service station and ‘go for a flip’ at the next. Although fingers are generally used to make that process easier, those accustomed to the act can make themselves heave simply by positioning themselves over a toilet bowl. When finished, they can even find themselves a pound lighter than before they ate.

Brushing the teeth straight after flipping helps to protect them from stomach acid that has been forced into contact with parts of the body not designed for exposure to a substance that can cause tissue damage.

Hill says: “There is no doubt flipping

Dental decay, gastro-oesophageal reflux, ulcers that could increase cancer threat

Jockeys putting themselves at a huge health risk every day

gives you an abnormal approach to food that may translate to a more formal eating disorder. About a third of jockeys who employ ‘traditional’ weight-control methods will have changes in their mental health, with a number at the depressive end of the spectrum. If they then follow an appropriate diet that often reverses.”

The list of other potential risks is long. It includes dental decay, gastro-oesophageal reflux, oesophageal ulcers that may increase the risk of cancer and reduced function of the sphincter (muscle valve) at the bottom of the oesophagus so unwanted vomiting becomes more likely. There is vulnerability to the opposite problem, with acid in the oesophagus causing scarring and then problems swallowing. There is a chance of oesophageal tears causing blood to be vomited. Through the mechanism of dehydration flipping can also, in the short term, drop a person's blood pressure causing dizziness, fainting and renal impairment. Dehydration impacts speed

of thinking, reaction time and muscular strength.

Most of those issues are reversible. Some are not.

Nutritional advice: fire up the metabolism and eat

The relationship between jockeys and food has become a hot topic.

The PJA has its own nutrition team, albeit one restricted to working off just £20,000 in industry funding. It offers cookery advice, produces nutrition guidelines, undertakes racecourse visits and arranges consultations. There is evidence its work has proved useful to several riders.

Many jockeys have also tried the ground-breaking methods advocated by Dr George Wilson, a post-doctoral research officer at Liverpool John Moores University, who has worked with numerous enthusiastic disciples, including Jim Crowley and Franny

Norton. Moreover, last April LJM and the BHA launched a major PhD study into jockey nutrition and wellbeing, while a bold new Jockey Training and Development Strategy will have welfare at its heart.

Wilson found a jockey's average body fat is 12 per cent, low for the majority of the population but in excess of the eight per cent for elite boxers and the seven to ten per cent for footballers. Lowering that 12 per cent body fat average to eight or nine per cent could deliver a loss of two to three kilos. To achieve that, Wilson prescribes a 30-minute early morning run to fire up the metabolism. Thereafter, he advises jockeys to stoke the metabolism by eating three meals and two snacks a day, prepared with food low in bad carbohydrates and high in protein. Do all that, he says, and you can simultaneously increase the amount you consume and reduce your weight.

Unfortunately, that has not worked for everyone.

The jockey who flips: ‘For some it's the only way’

One rider who has failed to benefit from expert guidance is the successful current jockey who is prepared, anonymously, to talk about his own ongoing experiences with flipping and his assessment of why it remains an issue.

“I've seen three nutritionists and followed a fitness programme, but it had no effect on me,” he says.

“I feel the PJA has done a good job in educating young jockeys, but nutritionists can only do so much – in the end, it's a personal choice. There is a support system but you can't help someone who doesn't want help. If

