WHERE ARE THEY NOW?
David Baxter catches up with Ben Hitchcott, who recently qualified as a farrier

No regrets over calling time early

THERE are various reasons jockeys quit the saddle, be it a losing battle with the scales or frustration at a lack of opportunities. However, for Ben Hitchcott the decision was taken so he could start his next career as a farrier. Hitchcott was 26 when he made the announcement, shortly after riding Red Moon to victory at Bangor in 2006, but it wasn’t on a whim. “I packed it in six years ago and it had always been on my mind,” Hitchcott says. “I didn’t want to get to retirement age and not have a back-up plan, and knowing that it takes six years to train to be a farrier I thought if I’m serious I might as well jump in and go racing in a couple of years early.”

“My best mate, who I grew up with, showed me his barn and he always said he’d train me. It wasn’t a particularly hard decision, although I do miss the fun and banter and the excitement of race-riding.”

During this time as a jump jockey Hitchcott progressed from being an amateur through to the professional ranks, riding his first winner aboard First Instance at Fontwell in 1999, and also finishing second to Tom Scudamore in the 2000-01 amateur riders’ championship. As a professional, Hitchcott rode more than 100 winners under rules, with Jonjo O’Neill, Bob Buckler, Diana Grissell and Rob Dickin all employing his services.

Hitchcott has no regrets about calling time as a jockey, although the change of occupation did provide its own challenges. “The first couple of years were quite hard as being a jockey is quite a glamorous lifestyle, and then you go back to the reality of being a horse owner and being an employee when you work for an apprenticeship,” he says. “But the honeymoon at the end was getting the qualification and being my own boss. That was another reason.”

Becoming a qualified farrier takes time, with a year-long course at college and a half-year apprenticeship, but Hitchcott is reaping the rewards, with his fledgling business in Groombridge, near Lingfield, already thriving. He says: “I’ve only been my own boss since September and I’ve got a mixed bag of clients. I look after hunters, dressage, point-to-pointers, and do work for David Phelan, who has a pointing and pre-training yard.”

“When not busy with the horse Phelan, Hitchcott likes to go hunting with his own horses, but racing is never too far away as he’s the elder brother of Flat jockey Sam Hitchcott. While Sam is still busy in the saddle, the spending the winner in Dubai, the pair talk daily with Ben able to draw on his own experiences as a jockey when required.

“Sam can let off steam to me if he needs to to which I like to think helps him,” he says. “It’s worked out well, I’m sure we would have been line riding against each other, but being the older brother part of you does think the younger one should do what I tell him!”

I GOTTA HORSE

David Carr speaks to Tony Bult, who is finally reaping the rewards of ownership

Sitting pretty thanks to power of Pink

Horse Maggie Pink Wins 2
Owner Tony Bult Age 68
Previous horses No wins from three horses
Best racing moment Maggie Pink’s first win. “On Racing UK you can see me, Mick [Appleby], my son and the lad Jamie going berserk right on the winning line – you’d think we wanted locking up!”

Owner Maggie Pink

Tony Bult with Maggie Pink after her victory at Wolverhampton

Kevin Sexton: still has work to do on the use of the whip

No wins from 18

With a champion jockey title already in the bag, Kevin Sexton was feeling a bit of pressure when he switched to the big league in April last year having already taken the 2010 northern pony racing and all-Ireland horse crowns. He rode 75 winners during his time on the circuit and didn’t look out of his depth on his first ride at Naas – until about three furlongs out. His mount, the blinkered Lago Indiana, dropped the bridle and was almost simultaneously squeezed back by horses on either side of him. With no drive in him, Sexton used his whip ineffectively and Lago Indiana dwindled to the very rear of the 18-runner field.

The Fahey family, who had taken him on, clearly had words following that ride and five months on, riding Seamus Fahey’s Solaras Exhibition, there was drive and no whip as the combination registered a one-and-three-quarter-length victory, which has Sexton’s first under rules. Sexton says: “He won easily enough. It was so straightforward. We sat in behind and when I started pushing him out he really got up and he really packed it up. I kept going right until the time. It was really great to get the winner for Seamus as I’d learned most of my trade there. He and his brothers have really helped me.”

The 18-year-old hails from Neney, near the Fahey’s base in Monasterervin, County Kildare, and still lives in his home town despite moving on from the Faheys to Jessica Harrington. He has continued to improve, chalking up two further wins on the Flat, including on decent hurdler Gahagow on occasion and at Fairyhouse in July, and two over hurdles in the past three months.

Thanks to his pony racing and Flat experience, Sexton’s judge of pace is top class and he always seems to ride his own race regardless of what others are doing around him. If that means losing or gaining places, then so be it.

However, he still has work to do on his use of the whip. When it comes out, it doesn’t often get put down and he’s less than slick pulling it through from side to side. He has yet to ride in a chase, but his balance over hurdles suggests the transition will be no issue and his ability to easily claim 7½lb off bottom weight of 9st 16lb should provide him with plenty of opportunities over the Christmas period.

SCOUTING REPORT

Jessica Lamb assesses the potential of pony racing champ

Kevin Sexton, who is now with Jessica Harrington

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Q&A ‘I want to really go for the conditional title’

How did you get into the sport? My uncle Aidan Sexton owns Sweep Lane Stud in Neney and had a horse in training with Seamus Fahey. One day he took me racing to watch her and introduced me to Seamus, who then took me on.

What are your ambitions for the jumps season? To continue to build up the number of riders I have and really go for the conditional rate.

What do you need to work on? It’s good to keep working on every aspect of your riding. Robbie Power and all the lads in Jessie Harrington’s are a great help.

What are your strengths? Coming from pony racing I’ve always worked hard to be strong and tidy in a finish and I think, hopefully, I am.

Which of your colleagues do you admire most? I’ve always been a big fan of Paul Carberry and Tony McCoy. Carberry has so much style and McCoy has so much strength.