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 out of his home in 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 it was there that I met Mark Johnston at Middletonham,” says Baird.

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 Ryan Moore and Chaz Eves and it was a case of learning by going, I joined Mark Johnston at Middletonham.”

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 stuck 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 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 Diggerhole & Landscaping was launched full-time two years ago and it has gone from strength to strength.

“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

Q&A with trainer Harry Fry ‘He travels so well’

What are his key attributes? He travels so well in his races and can be ridden lightly. He’s a three-mile-plus horse but he’s not slow and has that turn of foot to get into races.

He’s progressing at a rapid rate of knots – is there more to come? He handled the winter ground but will be better on a sounder surface and hopefully there’s lots to look forward to.

What chance of festival success? On what he did on New Year’s Day he’d have a very good chance but it’s about getting there in tip-top form and having luck on the day.

AS EDUCATIONS go, Mendip Express has had the edgewise equivalent of an Oxford 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 amateur to point-to-point to race 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 once run hurdles for Paul Nicholls as a five-year-old, has won his last nine races and has been beaten only once when completing.

“He is 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 denying 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 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-mile, for which Mendip Express is the clear favourite with some firms, is the preferred option.

Regular rider Will Biddick, who has built up a big 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 Desman, 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 Desman 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.”

Initial shock followed by pair of wins

Horse First Experience

Owner Fitosfar 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 First Experience syndicate and friend Guy Carstairs when First Experience finished tail end 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 not major occasion when it comes to town for the £10,000 claiming novice handicap over 7f at Wolverhampton on Sunday.

That run was too bad to be true according to her trainer and First Experience is on Valentine’s Day at Wolverhampton, after which we will know whether we have bought a dud. It was soon to disappear, opportunities began to dry up.

“Gary did a good job and when she came back Rae entered her in a maiden at Wolverhampton in November. The Withfold 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.

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