WHERE ARE THEY NOW?
Steve Dennis finds Ollie McPhail introducing youngsters to the delights of the sport

‘I cover more miles than I did as a rider’

Ollie McPhail may not have enjoyed great prominence as a jump jockey but he stands out from the crowd now, being around a foot taller than the horses of schoolchildren dressed in jockeys’ silks that he chaperones around the racecourses of Britain. McPhail is lead education officer for BHIST (British Horseracing Education & Standards Trust) and manages the Racing To School programme that seeks to introduce youngsters to the delights of the sport. Bringing his in the saddle he qualified as a plumber through Jets (Jockeys Employment Training Scheme) but has found his true calling as shepherd to a diverse flock.

‘I really enjoy it, it’s the perfect opportunity to use the experience I gained as a jockey and pass it on to the younger generation. “The idea is to teach children about racing while they’re applying their numeracy skills to the situation – racing’s all about numbers. The age range is from nine up to A level students and the vast majority have never been to a racecourse before, have never even been that close to a horse before.’

‘It’s free for schools and all kinds of children benefit from the Racing To School programme. We also go to yards and studs and into schools themselves – sometimes I did a double shift, helping out with the children in the morning and race riding in the afternoon” – and called a halt to his career, in one piece, to pursue his new role. Off the track his admin duties involve all liaison with the schools involved, while on-course he has freelance assistance from former jockeys Robert Bellamy and Jon Pritchard in the south and, on a full-time basis, Carrie Ford in the north.

And as far as recognition goes he’s top of the heap, having become a household name to hundreds of grateful schoolchildren. Ask any of them for the name of their favourite jockey and Ollie McPhail comes in well ahead of the likes of Tony McCoy and Frankie Dettori.

‘I get such a great buzz from it,’ says McPhail. ‘Those who have seen the expressions on those excited children at the racecourse will tell him he isn’t the only one.

I GOTTA HORSE

Allen Pope tells Peter Thomas about the welcome boost provided by Jakey

Blues clear at last for Chelsea fan

Horse Jakey Wins 1
Owner Allen Pope Age 65
Best moment Jakey winning on his second start after a long and patient build-up. Also Right Step winning last year’s Cursy and Suburban and Wise Dennis scoring twice in Dublin

When Allen Pope owned a horse named Wise Dennis, he was already fully aware of the ups and downs of owning a horse.

‘The horses have been finishing last, last and again,’ says the man who has had shares in horses for 20-odd years and funds its Turf habit by owning a Garwick-based logistics company that serves Nigeria. ‘It got so bad that a few weeks ago I had to say to a jockey ‘please don’t come last’ – and I was pleased when he came second last.

So, when Jakey crossed the line clear of his five rivals in the turfpool Sir David Prosser Maiden Stakes at Epsom a fortnight ago at the rewarding odds of 10-1, he went unbacked by a man who has been known to enjoy a bet in his time. Pope, originally from Clapham but more than 45 years with his clan in the Epsom area, fondly recalls a wholesale punt on a horse of his called Desert Regan on the same track in 2004, but the success of Jakey held even greater satisfaction for the owner, as he watched it in the company of his six-year-old grandson, after whom the three-year-old son of Cape Cross is named.

‘The rest of the family were watching from elsewhere, but Jakey and I were down by the winning post,’ he explains, ‘as I wanted to have a chat with the jockey, Richard Hughes, before he dashed off, to see what happened.’

‘His first run at Kempton suggested he had a bit more than we would have been aware he was just a late developer, because for me it’s always about the future. But he may have one more race this year, on the soft going he likes, and we’ll put him away after that as a progressive four-year-old for next year. We’re always looking for a better tomorrow.’

Q&A ‘You’re always looking for that big handicap winner’

How did you get into the sport? We always had horses at home so that was my first experience. I spent a bit of time at John Geoghegan’s yard before going to RACE (Racing Academy and Centre of Excellence) at the Curragh. What are your ambitions for the season? I don’t set goals or anything, I just want to ride as many winners as possible. Of course you’re always looking for that big handicap winner that gets you noticed, like Colin Keane winning the Topaz Mile at Galway this year. If I could ride a winner like that next season I’d be delighted.

What are your strengths? I’d like to think I’m quite strong for an apprentice.

What are your weaknesses? Like any 7lb claimer, I need to get more tidy and neat in the finish. That would be the main aspect I’d like to improve on.

Which jockeys do you admire most? Declan McDonogh – the way he’s so strong and tidy in the finish, he’s deadly to watch.

SCOUTING REPORT

Roran Groome talks to Gary Halpin, establishing himself after a dream start was followed by a fallow spell

Gary Halpin

2013 winner

Riding Maude Adams at the Curragh. To get a stable to consider him for a ride, you have to show you can win races. The Fillies’ Mile at York, where he was placed, was his first indication of it. Then came the 2012 Flat season in anticipation of a breakthrough, but he came out with a 0-33 record. “It was hugely disappointing,” says the County Dublin native. “I was going up to Dundalk nearly every Friday night but couldn’t get on a winner. After such a great start it was hard to take.”

But Halpin remained patient, kept working hard and has made a minor impact this season with five winners on the board. The first of the five was aboard Maude Adams at the Curragh in April and it was an important one, the first winner of the season for Mr Prendergast. The second came just five days later when Halpin was back at Dundalk to partner Indiana Charmer for Tracey Collins. Halpin describes it as a simple ride but it deserves more praise than that. He set a steady pace and kept enough in reserve to hold off all the challengers in the straight. It was a canny ride for a 7lb claimer and one that got his name out there again.

“I just kept working hard and stayed patient. Mr Prendergast has been very good to me. He kept giving me chances and I owe a lot to him for that. It’s a great yard to be at, with owners like Lady O’Reilly, Sheikh Hamdan Al Maktoum and Mr Vasicke.

‘I’m happy with the way the season has gone. I just want to keep going and keep improving now.’