WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

I GOTA HORSE

Steve Dennis meets Jim Kilduff who is overcoming life’s heartaches with Wild Ground

Man who quit too soon saddling up

ROBERT BIDDLECOMBE, son of three-time champion jockey Terry, appeared destined to follow in the footsteps of his father after he made a bright start to his riding career during the early 2000s.

However, at the age of just 22, after five seasons in which he rode 32 winners, he called time on race riding. As with so many young men, Biddlecombe agonised over his prospects for the future and, fearing he would find himself in his mid-30s without vocational skills or a next employment, decided to train as a saddler with the assistance of the Jockeys’ Employment Training Scheme (Jets).

Eight years on he still wonders if he made the right decision.

“I have very fond memories but a lot of frustration that I stopped. Sometimes I think I should never have stopped – I wish I hadn’t,” he says.

“But I wasn’t getting enough rides to make enough money so that by the time I was in retirement age I’d have enough to retire. I’d have had a moderate salary each year and by the time I was 26 I’d have to retire and find myself a new career.”

Champions at last as the dream unfolds

Wild Ground has been a revelation for her connections this season

When the dream came true at Fontwell

ONCE upon a time there was a horse called Aldaniti and a man named Bob Champion. You know all about them. Now there’s a horse named Wild Ground and a man called Jim Kilduff, and although we aren’t dealing in Grand Nationals the story isn’t so very far apart.

Wild Ground is a 12-year-old mare with a history of injury. She had a sinus operation, she struck herself in the mouth and then she had a tendon injury in one of her good legs, and to top it all she picked up a harelip fracture in her pelvis,” says Kilduff.

Kilduff, 60, has Parkinson’s disease, but he doesn’t let it affect him, and it had been his dream to own a racehorse since the age of eight when visits to the local clinic due to his bladder led to his interest in the sport.

“My Dad used to take me to the clinic and on the way back we’d stop at the pub,” he says. “I remember all the talks about horses – when I looked at their names in the paper it helped me relax, eased my asthma.”

Kilduff liked a bet, liked sitting at last month

with his grandfather in the shed and listening to the results on the radio in the evening. He had a penchant for tricasts, remembers well getting the 1-2-3 in the 1983 Grand National when Aldaniti led them home. And he still had the dream of owning a horse.

“The chance came with Wild Ground,” he says. “I went to Kevin Bishop because he was local and they’re nice people, straightforward. I bought the mare and had money for training fees, went halves with my son Dan. He dropped out after a while and my friend Ken Jones took his share.”

Later, though, frustrated by Wild Ground’s problems, Kilduff thought about cutting his losses. “All I’d done was pay out,” he says. “But Kevin told me he’d get her right and would train her for free until she won a race.”

Wild Ground returned from almost two years off, was pulled up at Taunton and then went to Fontwell last month for a long-distance chase. She won by 45 lengths. “I didn’t go,” checkles Kilduff. “I wasn’t feeling great that day so I watched in the bookies, and when she crossed the line my jaw hit the floor. It had been a miserable couple of years, what with my condition and the fact that my brother Tony and my brother-in-law Barry had both died. It was Barry who told me not to give up, that the mare would win a race one day. That day in the bookies it looked like she was going to win down through the clouds at me.”

Kilduff was keen to use the win to help fund a marathon run for a local charity, while she was on the easy list foaled a colt by Bishop because he was local and it’s nice people, straightforward.

“Then I was in a hotel in Budapest. I was doing triathlons,” he says. “I did that for two or three years and made the right decision. I might get my amateur status back in a couple of seasons and have a go at that, just as a bit of a hobby,” he says.

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