

SPECIAL REPORT



Nicholas Godfrey investigates the problems that can arise when jockeys call it a day and looks at the support network they have

IMAGINE losing the only existence you have known, leaving a gaping void and an uncertain future as you contemplate the idea of being shoved on the scrapheap with well over half your working life remaining. Is it any wonder some jockeys find it so hard to cope with retirement?

Even those who are fortunate enough to choose their own date can face potentially huge emotional and psychological issues alongside the obvious financial implications. Gone is the daily adrenaline rush of race-riding; gone is the camaraderie of the weighing room.

In recent weeks Michael Hills has spoken of how he will miss the buzz of riding winners, while Steve Drowne, although hoping to return in January, has admitted to being rudely awakened to the financial consequences of a lengthy spell on the sidelines minus his riding income.

And retirement can happen sooner than you think. According to research compiled by Jets (the Jockeys Employment and Training Scheme), the average age for Flat jockeys to step down is 33, while for jump jockeys the average closing date comes three years earlier.

Richard Dunwoody's obsessive attempts to fill the gap after a neck injury ended his career have become the stuff of racing folklore but the multiple champion is by no means alone in struggling with the relative emptiness of his post-jockey life.

Just listen to John Reid, who retired in September 2001 after nearly 50 Group 1 winners, including victories in the Derby, Arc and King George. "I think it is potentially a very dangerous time – and I'm talking for about four or five years after you've finished," says Reid, 57. "I think it's the same with all sportsmen. You're told you're no use any more and the truth is, you're not. That's a hard thing to be told."

According to The Lancet, medical studies have shown that elite athletes may be more predisposed than the general public to depression because of the physical and psychological demands placed on them in the sporting environment. For jockeys, their most vulnerable period may well come when they decide to hang up their boots – or, even worse, when the decision is made for them, perhaps through serious injury.

Fortunately, the sport is blessed with a superb support mechanism via Jets, the Injured Jockeys Fund and the Professional Jockeys Association (PJA). That wasn't always the case, however, and Reid points to five-time champion jockey Doug Smith, who committed suicide in 1989. "He killed himself because he couldn't cope," says Reid, who also mentions a second Classic-winning rider whose death was never recorded as suicide, and a former champion apprentice he says "drank himself to death".

Reid adds: "I understand now why that happens as I think many jockeys probably fall into a type of depression. You go from a sphere where you're going full burn all the time for a living to something else and there are

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

From riding winners and being in the limelight to isolation and depression . . . exploring the reality of retirement

CASE STUDY RODI GREENE

'It took me six months to accept I wouldn't ride again'

Rodi Greene faced an unwelcome double whammy after a fall from a 50-1 shot at Lingfield in March 2011. Not only did the accident mean an abrupt end to a career of 4,000-plus rides, the accident totally derailed his plans for the future.

Greene, who was 41, was left flat on his back for five weeks after displacing vertebrae; his right arm was paralysed for a spell. "At the time I was breaking in lots of horses, more than 70 winners, including Cue Card," he explains. "I thought I was well set for the future but you have to be really fit to do that and my arm isn't good enough now."

"I wasn't prepared for what happened and it took me six months to accept I wouldn't ride again," he adds. "I'd had 20-odd years doing what I loved, then all of a sudden it was taken away from me – and so was my future. Mentally, as well as physically, it was really hard. It was a pretty dark time."

Greene, who has a wife and three

children, pays tribute to racing's support network, including the Professional Riders Insurance Scheme. "Because it was a career-ending injury the money has only just stopped," he says. "It gave me the time to get myself on an even keel again. Without that we'd all have been out on the streets."

Greene has now recovered to the extent that he can ride out for Nigel Hawke and also act as a jockey coach. He has set up his own private-hire minibus firm.

"You've got to get stuck in but of course I miss the riding," he says. "People pay to queue up and go on a rollercoaster; when

you're a jockey you get to do that five or six times a day. You can't replace that."



withdrawal symptoms. You lose your identity a little bit as well. You're no longer a jockey, you're an ex-jockey – and it's not the X Factor, it's X-rated.

"All their working lives have been spent in that bubble and all jockeys have some sort of symptoms when

they stop riding, at whatever level you are. Some can get over it in a little while and some take a bit longer – and I know some who never get over it at all."

Reid, who rides out for Clive Cox, is also a jockey coach and does regular

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John Reid

corporate work at the racecourse. "Believe me, I'm not saying I'm immune either. It isn't easy and I'm not pretending I've coped with it very well – nobody copes with it very well." Dale Gibson, who retired three years ago, is now the PJA's liaison officer. "Being a jockey is a way of life as much as a job," he says. "Jockeys don't really know anything else and when you're riding, there's no time for anything else and the camaraderie of the weighing room is very, very strong. "Okay, it's dog eat dog once the stalls open but it's a close-knit community, so mentally you have to be well prepared for when that stops."

"There is a lot of personal sacrifice as a jockey – it's such a strict regime and you're generally working every Saturday and Sunday and you miss a lot of things, you neglect family and friends, and if you're not careful, that can actually be detrimental to when you retire. You need all your mental strength and the transition takes time."

PJA chief executive Paul Struthers is fully aware of the potential trauma linked to retirement. "It is sometimes very, very difficult to stop being a jockey," he says. "It's linked to depression issues and we're trying to get a closer link-up with Racing Welfare, which has a 24-hour helpline. "Jockeys can and do access that facility, although it would be a longer-term aspiration of ours to get a more central service for the sport."

Few people are as well placed to consider the particular problems facing jockeys as leading sports psychologist Michael Caulfield. A former chief executive of the PJA, he now works at Sporting Edge, a consultancy working with elite teams in sport and business. This month he gave a day-long presentation on career change to cricketers at Edgbaston.

"Of all the things they've ever faced as an athlete this is the toughest if they don't accept it," he says. "Whether you are a cricketer, a footballer or a jockey, it is bloody hard. The biggest issue is that this is a massive change but if you plan for it, you can cope with it better. The change becomes manageable."

Caulfield points to a recent Radio 5 Live documentary in which former Olympic rower James Cracknell examined the psychological backlash for Britain's medallists who have to