A SECOND LIFE

Chris Cook tells the extraordinary story of the organisation that proved jockeys can do much more than ride horses Pages 6-7

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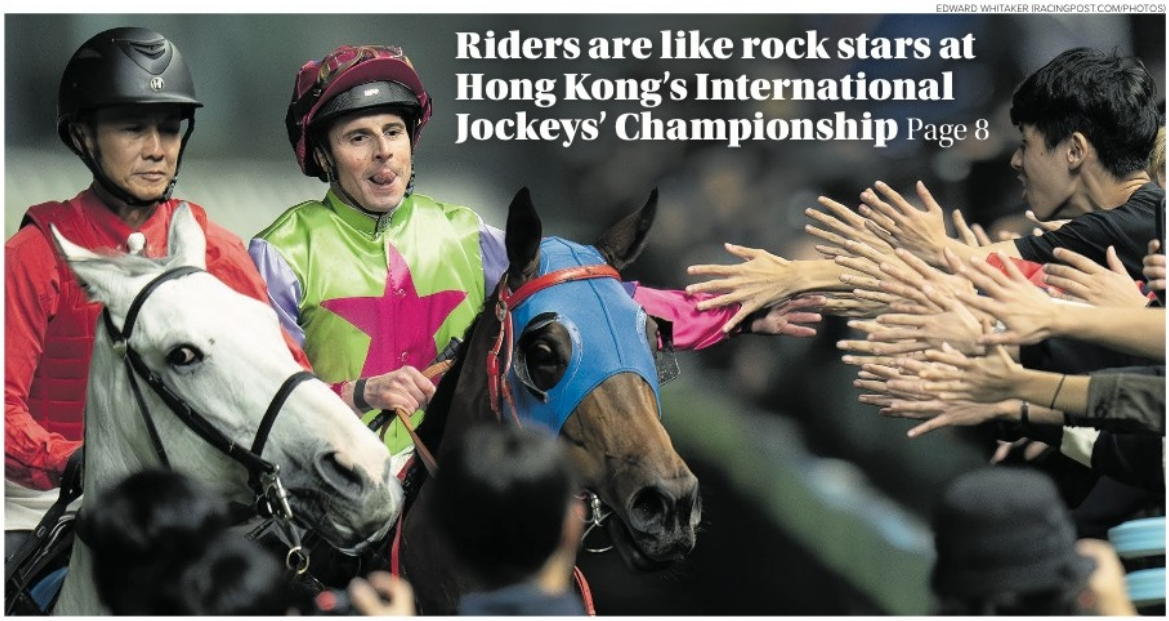

Riders are like rock stars at Hong Kong's International Jockeys' Championship Page 8

BHA chair Lord Allen warns British racing is on a 'burning platform'

Bill Barber
Industry editor

BHA chair Lord Allen has issued a plea to British racing to work together, warning the sport is on a "burning platform".

In one of his first public appearances since taking up the role in September, Allen told guests at the 254th Gimcrack Dinner at York racecourse on Tuesday night that racing needed to pay more attention to its customers, as well as build better relationships with bookmakers.

However, while Allen told the audience that there was no "silver bullet" to solve the sport's problems, he did believe that there was the opportunity to boost racing's income by being more commercial.

Speaking to journalist and broadcaster Lydia Hislop, Allen said that over the last 12 months since his appointment was announced he had been listening to people across the sport, adding: "I do think we need to have change."

Allen, whose long and storied business career included a spell as chief executive of ITV plc, acknowledged that the BHA did not

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Kennedy in full flight as exciting Christmas approaches

Denis Harney

RED-HOT Jack Kennedy is closing in fast on Darragh O'Keeffe in the Irish jockeys' championship but is refusing to look beyond the Christmas period, when he is set to ride class acts like Brighterdays-ahead and Romeo Coolio for boss Gordon Elliott.

The Kennedy-Elliott team is in full flight with the 2023-24 Irish champion jump jockey landing 12 winners from his last 26 rides, including a four-timer on Fairyhouse's Hatton's Grace card and another four-timer at Cork's Hilly Way Chase fixture.

Six Graded races have featured in a haul that has put Kennedy within 14 of championship leader O'Keeffe, but his priority is sustaining the momentum into the hectic Christmas spell.

"The last few weeks have been brilliant," Kennedy said. "The horses are in good form and hopefully we can keep it going."

Possibly the most impressive winner Kennedy has ridden in the last few weeks was Drinmore winner Romeo Coolio, who was made as short

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MORAY SMITH'S WELSH NATIONAL ADVICE, PAGE 5

‘JOCKEYS WOULD BE TERRIFIED’ THE GROUP BORN IN SECRECY AND FEAR THAT HAS BECOME AN INVALUABLE LIFELINE FOR RIDERS

Chris Cook on the story of the Jockeys Education & Training Scheme and its 30 years of helping riders find second careers

IT STARTED in secrecy and fear, an idea shaped at hidden meetings where the speakers would deny any involvement if questioned. Thirty years on, it is a celebrated part of racing’s landscape, a reason for toiling jockeys to keep their spirits up and a sign that things are now better than they used to be.

It is Jets, which stands for Jockeys’ Education & Training Scheme. It was created to tackle what had become a familiar sadness, that many jockeys had nothing to do when the evil day arrived and they stepped out of the weighing room for the final time.

“It became clear that a lot of jockeys would get to the end of their career really terrified,” says Michael Caulfield. He had taken over in 1988 as chief executive of the Jockeys Association of Great Britain, at a time when improvements were desired in several areas. Appointed in the week Strands Of Gold won the Hennessy, Caulfield’s initial brief from jumps champion Peter Scudamore had been simple but pressing: “Sort it out!”

As part of the job, Caulfield would attend meetings of the Injured Jockeys Fund at which trustees considered applications for help from ex-jockeys in need.

“The biggest thing that kept cropping up on every agenda was the ex-jockey who’d just drifted after stopping riding and doing what they absolutely loved,” he recalls. “Most of them weren’t financially secure, obviously. They’d be slightly injured, didn’t have enough savings, had left school early, so didn’t have any training. I remember thinking, if only we could equip them with skills for part two.”

That was Caulfield’s way of referring to what came after race-riding. He banned use of the word “retirement” in relation to ex-jockeys. At age 30 or 35, none of them were really retiring. They needed something else.

Meanwhile, in the Flat weighing room, Dana Mellor was noticing the same phenomenon.

“I saw a lot of grumpy jockeys, who clearly wanted to move on but just didn’t know how,” she says. “They’d have a mortgage and a family to support, but they just didn’t know where to start. So they just carried on.”

No easy routes were available. Good jobs in the industry, like being a starter or a stewards’ secretary, quite often went to ex-military types. Ex-jockeys had performed those roles but, taken as a group, they were not then seen as ideal recruiting material. And, in fairness, they did not see themselves that way.

Mellor recalls: “What I heard a lot of in those days was: ‘I can only ride a horse. I can’t do anything else.’”

“I saw jockeys who’d lost confidence in themselves,” Caulfield says, “because their career was coming to a close and they had nothing to fall back on, nothing to do.” Quitting the saddle meant an instant loss of status and purpose. “The phone stops ringing, no-one asks for tips, they don’t ring their agent and the world is very different.”

All of those depressing thoughts came on top of the knowledge that, for any ex-jockey, their source of thrills would be cut off. No more zooming along on reckless two-year-olds; no more pointing half-mad novice chasers at a line of fences. Nothing could ever be as much fun.

The three managers of Jets during its 30 years: (left to right) Dana Mellor, Rachel Jones and Lisa Delany

AT SOME point in the early 1990s, the IJF conducted a survey of its beneficiaries, the ex-jockeys it had been supporting. What, it asked, would be the most helpful thing? What did they most want? The answer, by a clear majority, was “a job”.

So a pilot scheme called Racing Employment was set up and Mellor, who was volunteering some time at the IJF while injured, was given the chance to run it. Her credentials were hard to miss; she’d been a law graduate before becoming a professional jockey and was immersed in the game. Her father was Stan Mellor, the first jump jockey to ride 1,000 winners and then a Cheltenham Festival-winning trainer. Her mother was Elain Mellor, who had been champion female jockey seven times in a 20-year Flat-racing career.

Caulfield engaged in a campaign of rallying support among his members for the idea of organised, funded training aimed at a second career out of the saddle. “There was a day I’ll never forget,” he says of an early meeting in Stokesley, on the edge of the North York Moors, at the home of an IJF almoner.

It was a gathering of big names from the northern circuit. Those present, if Caulfield’s memory is correct,

Clockwise from left: Dale Gibson, Mick Fitzgerald and (top right) Jamie Osborne participating in media training in the mid-1990s; former jockey Aodhagan Conlon collects his PhD

included Colin Hawkins, Chris Grant, John Lowe, Mark Birch and Mark Dwyer. It was to be a completely deniable meeting. No agenda was prepared. No minutes were taken.

"They were so nervous about it," he says. "We sat in her dining room with the curtains closed. They were terrified of being seen. If it was known that they were preparing for part two, doing an accountancy course or a course in equine dentistry, every trainer would think they were about to give up and their bottle had gone."

Eventually, Caulfield secured majority support for the idea of committing a percentage of jockeys' prize-money to a fund for retraining. That funding was then matched by the IJF. Jets started up in 1995 with Mellor as operational lead.

Even that did not dispel misgivings. She recalls: "There were jockeys who voted in favour, who rang me later and said: 'Just don't tell anyone I'm doing this. I don't want people thinking I'm going to retire.'

"It was very sensitive. It was a taboo thing, to say you were going to do anything other than concentrate 100 per cent on riding. Career development just wasn't a thing."

But it became a thing. Among the more popular courses in the early days were media training days, at which Jets significantly moulded the TV experience which fans of the sport now enjoy, decades later. Mellor recalls some of the keen participants from the 90s weighing room: Luke Harvey, Jason Weaver, Mick Fitzgerald, Andrew Thornton...

Fitzgerald readily acknowledges his debt to Jets.

"I did a media course when they first started and it was a massive help," he says. "It used to be a no-no, thinking about life after race-riding. Nowadays, jockeys have a brilliant facility at their disposal to prepare for the next chapter."

Mellor got herself trained as a career coach so she could advise those with little idea of what might suit them. She remembers noticing two distinct mindsets when it came to choosing the next job.

"One who would say, 'Whatever I do, I've got to stay in racing, I can't leave racing.' And then others would say, 'If I can't be a jockey and walk in the weighing room, I don't want to be anywhere near or have anything to do with racing.'

"It physically hurts, it really does. You were the performer and now you're a spectator. I even found that hard when Stan stopped training."

But it turns out that jockeys can tackle a wide array of alternative work. Caulfield remembers "engineers, scientists and HGV drivers" among Jets graduates.

If you hang around places where racehorses are trained, you will have encountered others. Perhaps you dropped in at Eva Moscrop's cafe, the Cortado, near Newmarket's clock tower. Maybe you got some fish and chips from Ian Shoemark, whose Greedy's is long established in Stow-on-the-Wold, a place where you might have seen Conor and Kieran, long before they climbed into the saddle themselves.

Sometimes, there needs to be an edge of danger in the second career, because the quiet life will rarely suit the sort of person who enjoys race-riding. Being comfortable with risk undoubtedly helped Chris Webb to get started as a driving instructor and let 17-year-olds get behind the wheel of his car.

Inevitably, some ex-jockeys are now whizzing around our towns and cities under blue lights. Kylie Manser-Baines joined the London Fire Brigade. Thomas Brown is on his way to becoming a paramedic with the East of England Ambulance Service. "I love it, I really feel I'm made for it," he said recently.

BOTH Manser-Baines and Brown were winners at the annual Richard Davis awards, organised by Jets to recognise riders who have made significant advances in new careers or in the development of additional skills. The awards are named after Davis, who was working with Jets to extend his own skill-set before tragically suffering a fatal fall in the summer of 1996, at the age of 27. Members of his family attend the awards each year.

Nominated alongside Brown at this year's awards was Josh Crane, who traded in his saddle for an airline pilot's licence and landed a job with Jet2. Also recognised was Thomasina 'Tommy' Eyston, who completed a master's degree in neuroscience (with distinction) while continuing to ride over fences. Jockeys might need a touch of madness but some of them are extremely bright.

Also supported by Jets in his academic career was Dr Aodhagan Conlon. You might remember him as A Conlon (7), riding winners at Ffos Las for Rebecca Curtis. These days, he's a psychologist in the Player Development Programme at Brighton & Hove Albion.

He remembers being encouraged to pursue a PhD as a means of standing out from others trying to break into sports psychology and says: "Without the funding, I just wouldn't have had the appetite to put that much money into it."

When Mellor moved on from Jets, Lisa Delany took charge, eventually stepping down from the manager's role in September after 23 years. She remembers early resentment from a trainer who accused her of funnelling good people out of the industry, which she counters by pointing out that Jets has often retrained jockeys for other roles in racing. She points with pride at Stewards' Cup-winning rider Richard Perham, long established as head of coaching at the British Racing School.

"If you look after employees and they have a good experience, they're so much more likely to stay in the industry," she says. "You need to look after these people, because there's no queue outside, waiting to come in.

"People are still getting to grips with the idea that, if jockeys are working on something else, it doesn't mean they're not interested in their career, it doesn't mean they're thinking about moving on. It means they're putting a Plan B in place."

A study of Australian rugby players in 2018 concluded that planning for a second career could actually help athletes show improved performance. It is an insight Caulfield intuited 30 years ago, when he recalls telling the fretful jockeys in Stokesley: "Actually, it will give you huge confidence in your riding career, because you'll know you can do something else afterwards, so you can get more relaxed about riding."

Now he adds: "And that has happened. Because they realised they were good at something else, that they could train and read and study as well as riding, they began to like themselves a bit more."

The old lament about only being good for sitting on a horse is not something you should hear from a jockey these days. We have 30 years of Jets to thank for that.