



NEVER-ENDING STORY

DONN McCLEAN talks with the best jump jockey around and in the eyes of many, the best there has ever been

WHERE do you start with Ruby Walsh? Start with the Cheltenham Festival if you like, 52 winners, more than any other rider; leading rider there 10 times, more than any other rider; seven winners at one Festival, (yes you've guessed) more than any other rider. And he has done it twice.

Start with the horses, Master Minded and Hurricane Fly and Big Buck's and Annie Power and Faugheen and Kauto Star. The horses that made the rider, the rider that made the horses.

Or start with the rider.

"Sure start at the beginning."

Start with tactics, start with pace. There are many things that set Ruby Walsh apart as a rider, but his judgement of pace is exceptional. If you watch a race and think that he is too far back in the field, you are probably wrong: it is probable that the other riders are going too quickly. And if you think that he is too far forward, the others are probably going too slowly.

Walsh's mastery of the fractions has been seen to stunning effect in the last two Champion Hurdles, on Faugheen (left) and Annie Power



DMC: You say in your autobiography that when you started out riding, you counted 14 seconds per furlong. Did you really do that?

RW: I did. I used it as a guide. When you were making the running, I always had the fear of going too fast. I could cope with going too slow. If you went a fraction slow, at least your horse finished. But if you went too fast, and your horse didn't finish, that to me was a bad ride.

DMC: And yet, to the general public, if you don't get there, that's the worst ride, whereas if you kick on early and get caught, that's forgivable.

RW: Yeah I suppose you're right. People are looking for a run for their money. But if you go too fast, the punter actually didn't get a run for his money. If you go too fast, you can't win. I've always looked at it that way. The crime was going too fast. And I still think it's a crime. I can cope with going too slow. I would sometimes come in and say to Willie, I didn't go fast enough. And I kick myself, because it is an error. But I can cope with it. I still think that going too fast is a cardinal sin.

DMC: And did you actually count the seconds?

RW: One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand, four one thousand.

DMC: Really?

RW: Obviously, you didn't have a stopwatch, so you couldn't get it bang on. But you'd be close enough. And then, you get a little bit more experienced, you become more accustomed to pace, and you don't have to count any more. But when I was younger, yeah I used to count all the time. And I was riding mostly in bumpers, you could do it on the flat. It gets a little more complicated when you start jumping hurdles and fences.

DMC: And did other riders do that?

RW: I don't know. I suppose they didn't. I never asked anybody!

“Pace is key. Position is second to pace”



“Vautour, you'd just think that, he was your superstar... this year, Willie did a few small things differently with him, and he just seemed to be blossoming”



DMC: And how did you know that that was the right pace?

RW: You just look at the time. Divide it by 16.

DMC: For two miles, 16 furlongs?

RW: Yeah, for two miles. It was just a fear of going too quick. I suppose it was just, try not to make mistakes. And for me, pace was a huge thing.

DMC: And where did that notion come from, that pace was so important? Your dad?

RW: Yeah, Dad. Pace was key. Position was second to pace.

DMC: And is that still the case for you? Are you still big on pace?

RW: I try to be. Different races are different and different horses are different obviously, but yeah. Pace is paramount.

MAYBE you start with riding in Britain, different to Ireland. In Ireland they go more slowly early on and quicken; last man off the bridle usually wins. The ground is generally softer here. You just can't go fast or you won't complete. In Britain you're on the pace from flagfall.

And there are the characteristics of the tracks. You ride a track often enough, you get to know its unique points, its subtleties: where you can take a breather, where you can make ground, where is the best of the ground.

That's experience for you. You can't buy that knowledge, you can only learn it.

So you spend your formative riding years in Ireland, riding at every track, getting to know its characteristics, the subtle points of every course. Then you start riding in Britain, and you have to learn the characteristics of a whole new set of tracks. Twice as many tracks.

Take Chepstow, for example. You watch Chepstow on

television from your sitting room at home in Kildare and you think, why don't they take their time? Why do they go for home so early? If you had a bit of patience, you'd win every race. Then you ride it. Different story.

You realise, if you take your time, you can't make up the ground. Uphill at the top of the home straight, then downhill. There's nowhere to make up the ground. You don't want to be making it going up a hill, and sure every horse runs at the same speed downhill. Chepstow is one of those tracks that looks very different when you are riding it compared to when you are watching it.

DMC: So how do you do that? How do you learn the subtleties of the British tracks?

RW: You follow AP!

DMC: Really?

RW: Yeah. How are you going to ride this race? I'm going to follow AP. I spent my early days in Britain following AP.

It was Ruby's relationship with Paul Nicholls that saw him ride in Britain so much in the early 2000s. Willie Mullins in Ireland, Paul Nicholls in Britain. Ireland on Sunday, Britain on Saturday, Ireland on Thursday. He rode for the champion trainer in Britain on Saturday, he rode for the champion trainer in Ireland on Sunday, and he pursued a PhD in diplomacy.

He couldn't always go where he thought the winner was, he went where he thought he should go. There's the diplomacy right there. He rode for both trainers for a decade, and the results flowed.

DMC: You kept both trainers happy for 10 years?

RW: I suppose the best way to keep anyone happy is with success. And we were lucky enough to have plenty of success.

DMC: And did you enjoy it all?



There's never a good time to say goodbye to Paul Nicholls. Just like there'll never be a good time to say goodbye to Willie Mullins

AD



“ Plumpton on Monday, Huntingdon on Tuesday, Warwick on Wednesday, Thurles on Thursday. Then Newbury on Saturday, back to Ireland on Sunday. It was my childhood dream ”

RW: I loved it. I loved every minute of it, probably up until the final year. And I suppose that was a progression of your life as much as anything else. When I started, Gillian would get a flight over on a Friday and would go racing on Saturday. Chanelle and AP were brilliant to us at that time. The more I look back on it, the more grateful I am for what they did for us. But I loved it.

DMC: Going racing every day?

RW: Plumpton on Monday, Huntingdon on Tuesday, Warwick on Wednesday, Thurles on Thursday. Then Newbury on Saturday, back to Ireland on Sunday. It was my childhood dream.

DMC: And you were living it.

RW: And I was living it. But then, you move on in your life, we got married, Isabelle was born, Elsa was born, and there you are, still doing a hundred miles an hour.

He thinks for a second.

RW: I just got tired of not going home.

DMC: I get that.

RW: It wasn't the riding, I loved the riding, I just got tired of not going home. Of going from airport to hire-car to airport. That was it. I had never set out thinking, I'm going to do this for 10 years, and then I'm going to do something else. I just set out chasing the dream, and when the dream started to become... not a nightmare, it was never a nightmare. The riding was brilliant. I was just getting tired of the travelling.

DMC: And that comes with moving on?

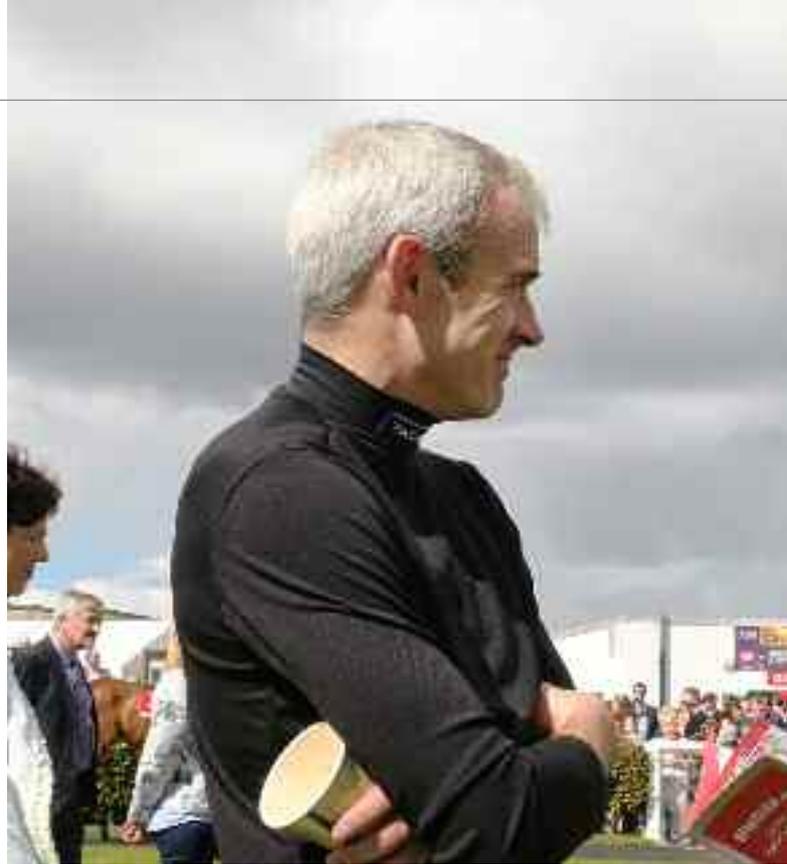
RW: Moving on, family. Your family is your life. And all that you do, your career, that's for your family, for their future.

DMC: And did your attitude change when the girls came along? Your attitude to work or to racing or to life?

RW: I suppose it changed. Your responsibility is not just to yourself any more, it's not just about riding winners any more. You have way more responsibility. Gillian and the girls. You actually have real responsibility!



Nichols Canyon retained the Morgiana Hurdle last month to give Walsh an incredible 189th Grade 1 success



DMC: And you don't before you have kids?

RW: Well, you're living in this cocoon, you think your life is so important, it's all about the next horse, the next winner. Then you realise that this is just a bubble you are living in, that the real world is actually outside you. Then you have a wife and kids, Isabelle and Elsa and now Gemma, and all of a sudden you're in the real world.

DMC: And leaving England, it coincided with the end of the Kauto Star, Denman, Big Buck's, Master Minded era?

RW: Well, it did, but they were gone the year before really, and that wasn't it. Actually, the year that I left, Silviniaco Conti had fallen when he was cantering at the third last in the Gold Cup. So you're leaving a potential Gold Cup winner behind you. And there were good novices there. No, it was just time for me. When's a good time? There's never a good time to say goodbye to Paul Nicholls. Just like there'll never be a good time to say goodbye to Willie Mullins.

“ It's all to do with what Willie sees. He trains off instinct ”

START with Willie Mullins then, start with Crimson City, the first horse that Ruby ever rode for him, at Listowel in September 1995, or with Young Fenora, on whom Ruby won at Leopardstown two months later.

DMC: Has Willie's operation evolved through the years?

RW: I've been going down to Willie's since I was 16, and his method of training probably hasn't changed much at all in 20 years. They're still very fit, they're extremely healthy, but they are still all trained as individuals. It hasn't become mass production and repetitious. He still looks at every horse as an individual.

DMC: Is that why is he so good?

RW: He trains off his eye. He looks at them and decides: he's a bit heavy, we'll do a bit more with him today. Or, he's a bit light, we'll just canter him. And I might have got up on him thinking he's going to work. It's all to do with what Willie sees. He trains off instinct.

Start with loss, Avant Tout and Vautour, one a hugely



*"How are you going to ride this race?
I'm going to follow AP"*

promising young chaser with buckets of potential, the other a brilliant chaser who could have been more brilliant still. Both lost in separate incidents on the same weekend at the start of this season.

RW: *Avant Tout was all potential. Willie thought, with his pedigree, he could be a Hennessy horse. It's desperate for everybody, for the lads in the yard, for the owners, the Supreme Racing Club. He was a proper horse for them. Vautour, you'd just think that, he was your superstar. He struggled a bit last year, he was never bombing, he was never showing us what he had shown us the year before. Whereas this year, Willie did a few small things differently with him, and he just seemed to be blossoming. You know the engine is there. It was just a matter of getting him right. Yeah that was disappointing.*

DMC: *What is it that's most disappointing? Potential unfulfilled?*

RW: *Oh yeah, that and everything else. Like, I'm sure Nicky Henderson was disappointed on the day, when Sprinter Sacre was retired. But there's a huge difference between retiring a horse and losing a horse. Sprinter Sacre is set to have a happy retirement. That's very different to poor Vautour.*

DMC: *I remember you saying on The Late Late Show a little while ago that you didn't really have any affection for Kauto Star?*

RW: *I suppose you try to keep yourself emotionally detached from them, because you know what can go wrong, and you'd be upset. So you try not to get emotionally attached, but it doesn't always work out that way.*

DMC: *It must be difficult to detach yourself emotionally from this animal who is doing what you ask him to do, who is trusting you, trying to please you?*

RW: *Of course it is. And no matter how you try, it's still the worst feeling in the world when you are standing there, waiting for the vet to come. It never gets any easier. It's always horrible. It's a part of the game that you'd love not to be there, but unfortunately it is.*

DMC: *And are there some horses that you connect with more than others?*

RW: *Of course there are. Papillon and Rince Ri for starters, they were out in that field over there for the last six months. They only left last week. I suppose, the good ones, you're with them for longer. And they're the ones that are there on the big days, when there is most pressure. Not that they know, but you know. I suppose, as a jockey though, you don't develop the same relationship with them as a stable lad or a stable girl, who is with them all the time, grooming them, mucking them out. Or a trainer, who is looking at them over a stable door at 10 o'clock at night, every night. So it's definitely harder on the trainer and the stable staff than it is on the jockey.*

Perhaps you just start with the here and now.

DMC: *So what drives you forward now?*

RW: *I love it. And it's the dream of finding the next one, the next Kauto Star, the next Vautour. To bring you to those big days, to give you those experiences, to give you those memories. There's nothing like riding a big winner, a winner at Cheltenham. The hype, the build-up, the intensity of it all.*

DMC: *You still get that kick, even after all you have achieved?*

RW: *I do. I still get that kick, more than ever. I love these weeks, Punchestown, Navan, Fairyhouse, all the way to Leopardstown at Christmas. I love Leopardstown at Christmas. And then into the new year, those big Leopardstown meetings, and then you're on to Cheltenham. Then Punchestown. It's brilliant.*

It's a continuum. And once you have started, it is difficult to know where to stop. ■



*"I just got tired of not going home."
With wife Gillian, daughters Elsa, Isabelle and Gemma,
and Tiger*