

Ferdy Murphy  
By Donn McClean

It is the first day of the 1980 Cheltenham Festival. Ferdy Murphy is standing in the parade ring before the Arkle Trophy with Tommy Carberry, Anaglog's Daughter's big race jockey.

"Just take her down steady, but before the tape goes up, make sure to point her at it," says Ferdy.

"Will I go on or sit in?" asks Tommy.

"You won't have any choice Tommy, just make sure she's facing the right direction."

It takes Tommy two fences to get to grips with this little mare, pint size, wild as a deer, runs as fast as she can for as long as she can and jumps fences like she has springs in her heels. By the time they get to the third fence, Carberry has figured her out and the pair are clear, Tommy holding the reins by his finger tips, two strands of silk. They don't see another rival until they are pulling up after crossing the winning line.

The win sparks a week of partying for Murphy and the mare's owners, Tony and Bill Durkan. It's not every day you win the Arkle. The mare is due to run again at Chepstow on Saturday. On Thursday, Tommy Carberry gets injured in a fall at Cheltenham, so Jonjo O'Neill is booked for the ride. Murphy arrives at Chepstow on Saturday morning to learn that Jonjo has broken his collar bone in a fall at Hexham the previous day. He has a look through the paper for a replacement, but concludes that there is nobody suitable available. He breaks the news to Tony Durkan.

"We'll have to withdraw her Tony," he says

"Sure, we're here now," says Tony. "We may as well run. Why don't you ride her?"

Murphy weighs out at 12st 4lb with a 1lb saddle, Friday evening's party still swilling around his blood stream. He probably cheats a little. He has a block of sponge instead of a saddle when he gets up on the scales, and he may be wearing plastic boots, barely legal. He may weigh 12st 9lb or 12st 10lb, but the scales say 12st 4lb and that's what counts. It doesn't matter anyway. Even though the mare tries to bolt with him on the way to the start, and does bolt with him during the race itself, they win by a distance.

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Ferdy Murphy, 59 years and one day old, is at the top end of the gallop. He takes off his glove and extends a warm and well worn hand. Interesting that he should take off his glove, you think. It's courteous, it's welcoming, and it's typical of Murphy.

"There's L'Antartique there," he says, reading your mind.

The seven-year-old gelding breaks into a canter and begins the long haul up the gallop, five and a half furlongs from the bend to the top. Winner of the same intermediate chase at Carlisle last Sunday that Monet's Garden won in 2006, L'Antartique is being primed for a tilt at the Paddy Power Gold Cup at Cheltenham next Saturday.

Aces Four, one of last season's leading staying novices and on many shortlists for the Gold Cup this season, passes by soon afterwards. Later on we will see Hot Weld, Joes Edge, Marshall Hall, Another Promise, New Alco and about 95 others. Murphy was by far the most successful trainer based in the north of England last season and it looks like he has the firepower to maintain that position this season. The farmer's son from Wexford has come a long way.

"We had a 100-acre farm, and that was all ploughed with horses," he says now, sitting back in his chair in his office. "My whole life revolved around horses. They were the most important thing. They came before everything. I went to make my confirmation on a pony and trap. My mother used to train greyhounds, and she'd bring the dogs to Enniscorthy on a pony and trap. So we were taught to look after them well. If a horse went wrong, or got a dirty nose or got sick, you were in big trouble. My father used to tell us that, if your horses were looking well, everything else was all right."

In 1963 Murphy got a job with Phonsie O'Brien, Vincent's brother. It wasn't easy getting a job with Phonsie. A neighbour knew somebody who knew somebody who knew Phonsie. That's the way things were done in Ireland in those days. It took about a year for the job to materialise, but it was well worth the wait.

"Phonsie was an absolute gentleman," says Murphy. "He was years ahead of his time, fantastic personality and a great man to be around. He'd never pass you in the morning without saying good morning. He valued his people. And he could mix with all types of people, on one level with owners like Raymond Guest and Mrs Valentine, and on another level he was great with the lads. I had fantastic respect for him, and I learned a huge amount during my time there."

There was good money in the building trade in England at the time, and Murphy was anxious to get on in life, make a few quid. So he left racing, left horses behind him, and went digging for gold in London. He made plenty of money, but he missed his horses. An opportunity came to go back to Wexford to break horses, and he jumped at it. From there he joined Paddy Mullins, first as a breaker of young horses, then as head lad and eventually as first jockey.

"Paddy was different to Phonsie," says Ferdy thoughtfully, "but again, an absolute genius. Whereas in Phonsie's everything would be immaculate, if there was a scratch on something there'd be someone in to paint it straight away, in Paddy's it was a case of everyone muck in together, hell for leather the whole way, as rough as a badger's arse. Fantastic trainer though. It was great for me to see the two sides."

After seven years with Mullins, as head lad, first jockey, gallops manager, head bottle-washer, he decided that he wanted to have a go on his own. The weight got him in the end, wasting all the time, an 11st-something frame that could squeeze down to 10st 12lb wasn't an asset when the minimum weight in Ireland at the time was 9st 7lb. He started riding a couple for Bill and Tony Durkan and they asked him if he would be interested in becoming their private trainer.

“We had no gallops,” reminisces Murphy. “It’s amazing what you can do. We had one field that had a little hill on it, about a furlong and a half long. I had great people with me though, Maureen Danagher, who trains now in Patrickswell, and a lad called Martin Mulligan. And we worked hard. I’d say to them, ‘Martin, you do 32.’ Thirty-two times up the hill! ‘Maureen you do 20.’ You went up it slowly and walked them down. Amazing isn’t it?”

You wouldn’t have found Murphy’s name registered as a trainer with the Turf Club, you wouldn’t have seen his name on a racecard, you won’t see his name now down as the trainer of the 1980 Arkle winner, but it didn’t bother him in the slightest. He was doing well, doing what he loved, was on a good salary and he just got on with it.

It was the same when he moved over to the UK to take on the role as private trainer for Geoff Hubbard. More success ensued. Sibton Abbey, a 40-1 shot who was 21lb out of the handicap, Adrian Maguire up, got the better of favourite Jodami in the 1992 Hennessy Gold Cup. But it was Gee-A’s win in the 1992 Fox Hunters’ at Aintree, over the Grand National fences, with his son Paul on board, that stands out for Murphy. Still the highlight of his career. The lowlight is easy as well.

French Holly had won the 1998 Sun Alliance Hurdle, he had finished third to Istabraq in the 1999 Champion Hurdle, and all the while he was a chaser masquerading as a hurdler. He won his first chase at Wetherby in October 1999 by 20 lengths. Turns out, it was the only steeplechase race in which he ever ran.

“He was a special horse,” recalls Murphy. “The best I’ve ever had for sure. He always gave his all. Andrew Thornton came up to school him after Wetherby. He went up the first time and jumped brilliant, went up the second time, jumped great again, the third time he just reached for it a bit, knocked his chin off the ground and broke the vertebrae in the back of his head. It was a million to one shot. He didn’t even fall. I was right beside him, 20 yards away from him, and saw him crumple to the ground. It was like putting a bullet in his head. We were devastated. He was the horse who would have taken us on.”

There followed a couple of lean years. A bad bout of ringworm hit the yard, and then there was the Kenyon Confronts programme, the Panorama Thing, as Murphy calls it.

“They filmed me for 10 months to get me to say what they wanted me to say,” he says slowly. “They put the words in my mouth. The guy asked me 100 times to stop horses, and I told him 100 times that you couldn’t be doing it, that it was a mug’s game. Then he asked me how would you stop one and I told him you could just go a bit easy on him at home for a week or two. That was it. The Jockey Club did me on that for bringing racing into disrepute. All they were worried about was perception, what the press were going to say about them. It was unbelievable.”

That all seems like a long time ago now. Two more winners at Cheltenham in 2006, Hot Weld and You’re Special, were followed by another brace in 2007, Joes Edge and L’Antartique. Add to that Aces Four’s win in the Mildmay Chase last season, Another Promise’s win in the Swordlestown Cup and Hot Weld’s remarkable Scottish National and Betfred Gold Cup double, and you can see why Murphy is looking forward to the season that stretches before him.

“I have had a lot of fun in racing,” he says thoughtfully. “I have worked with and for some fantastic people. Touch wood, all the family are healthy, Janet is great, things are going well with the horses, Graham Lee is a great addition, we’re getting a better type of horse, and it’s going the right way. I have a great team of people here. I’m very lucky.”

Victory for L’Antartique in the Paddy Power Gold Cup at Cheltenham on Saturday in the famed blue and white Durkan colours would be a remarkable fusion of the past, the present and the future for Murphy. Just make sure that Graham Lee has a real saddle on his lap when he weighs out.

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