

# Those Golden Moments

## February 17, 1987 : MJR's first runner takes to the track at Towcester

**I**T was 28 years ago this month that a nine-year-old chestnut gelding called General Billy took his place among the 21 runners for a two-mile, five-furlong handicap hurdle at Towcester.

The race, the last on the card on February 17, 1987, was worth the princely sum of £1,671.30 to the winner. A flurry of snow fell as the field approached the tapes. The gelding, in the experienced hands of jockey Richard Rowe, was sent off at 16/1.

The hardy souls who continued to endure the rigours of a cold Northamptonshire winter's day into the late afternoon were blissfully unaware that they were about to witness what the Glasgow Herald would describe in the following day's edition as 'an insignificant event in an undistinguished career, but a significant milestone in the life of a young Scottish vet who made racing headlines four years ago when he helped save the Grand National.'

There are no prizes for guessing that General Billy's trainer was none other than Mark Johnston.

General Billy acquitted himself reasonably well in the race, from an objective point of view, though Raceform dismissed his performance with a comment of n.d. - never dangerous. Challenging for the lead briefly, he faded in the closing stages, finishing ninth of the 21 runners.

The whole Johnston clan made the trip to Towcester, including Mark's father Ron, and hopes were high that Mark's career could have got off to a flying start.

"We thought it would win," Deirdre told Mark's biographer Nick Townsend, "and we were devastated when it didn't." There was a hint that this had not been the jockey's finest hour!

The first runner had been sent out from Mark and Deirdre's first training base, Bank End Stables in North Somercotes, Lincolnshire. The stables were, in Mark's estimation, situated in the coldest place on Earth.

"It was all reclaimed land around there," Mark recalls, "and completely flat too. The wind used to blow straight in from Russia."

The stables were situated around a mile from the beach, and Mark used the shoreline for gallops.

"I remember there were two telegraph poles which we reckoned were two furlongs apart," he told us.

"I used to climb up one of them to get a better view of the horses working!"

However, visits to the gallops had to be meticulously planned, as the beach was, and still is, used as a bombing range by the Ministry of Defence.

Mark lost no time in tilting at his first windmill. His training licence, after some hiccups along the way, had been granted on January 20, just four weeks before the Towcester race. His achievement in securing both his first stables and the dual-purpose licence had registered on the radar of the celebrated Scottish turf journalist, the late Tom McConnell. It was McConnell whose Glasgow Herald story appeared the day after General Billy's first run. In it, he leaves the reader in no doubt about how much these events mattered to Mark.

"Mark Johnston, aged 27, from Gartmore, near Aberfoyle," he wrote, "recently achieved his life's ambition when he was granted a trainer's licence."

Later in the article, he quotes Mark as saying: "I have 12 horses, including eight for the coming Flat season. It's like a dream come true."

A week later, Mark had his second runner when Rosie Oh was sent to Huntingdon for a novice hurdle. She became the yard's first placed horse when finishing fourth under the conditional jockey David Hood, who later went on to become Director of Public Relations with the William Hill Organisation.

McConnell's story also recounts the unusual tale of how Mark played a role in the efforts to 'save' the Grand National. In the early 1980s the future of the great race was far from secure, and in 1983 it was reckoned that a figure in the region of £4million would be needed to save the



**Mark leads General Billy back from exercise at Bank End Stables**

racecourse from closure. As a final-year student at vet school in Glasgow, Mark was forever thinking of ways to get his name recognised in racing circles.

He struck on the idea of offering for auction a three-year-old colt by the giant Scallywag which he had bred out of the mare Kimbo, which his father had bought at the Ascot sales. Mark had broken him, but the cost of putting the colt, Mister, into training was beyond the family budget at the time.

"I had this idea that we could do our best to help save the race by giving the horse to be auctioned," Mark told us.

"At the same time, the horse would go into training, which is what I really wanted. I made the offer, and the people behind the campaign accepted it."

The horse was sold, in the winner's enclosure at Aintree, for 10,500gns to Glasgow-based businessman Arthur McCluskey, and the proceeds duly went to save the National. Mark and his father were there to see the auction and Mark was interviewed by the media, including the BBC.

As McConnell wrote after General Billy's Towcester run: "His (Mark's) generous gesture also started a chain of events which led to him acquiring a small 20-box yard at Louth in Lincolnshire."

And the rest, as they say, is history! ■

