



# Mark Johnston's

## RED RETURNS

**I**T was way back in the summer of 1982, when spending my summer holidays from vet school in the USA, that I was first introduced to western riding and Quarter Horses. I was immediately struck by the practicality of the riding style for working with cattle or horses and I couldn't help but note that, while western horses come in all shapes and sizes and many of those working on the racetrack are thoroughbred, the Quarter Horse is ideally suited to the role. It is the Land Rover, while the thoroughbred is the Ferrari. I wanted one.

I must have talked about this desire for years to come because, some time in 1993, a friend, Jaqueline Wells (her husband was the founder editor, journalist, printer and gofer of the Klarion) called me to say that there was a Quarter Horse advertised for sale in, of all places, the Darlington and Stockton Times. I think the asking price was £4,000 for a 9yo entire horse. "It won't be the real thing", I said.

### Exquisite

A few weeks later Jaqueline called again to say that she had been talking to the owner and the horse was unsold. He would now accept "just" £2,000 for him. I was again dismissive but soon afterwards, when Deirdre and I had nothing to do one Sunday afternoon (that did occasionally happen in those days) I suggested that we go and have a look at "that Quarter Horse".

An appointment was made and soon afterwards we were driving into a farmyard near Darlington. There, standing in the middle of the yard, "ground tied" (in a halter with the rope hanging loose to the ground), was an exquisite example of the American

Quarter Horse. And not a soul in sight. "I want him", I said.

We tracked down the owner, Andy Grant, who had obviously deliberately positioned the horse in the middle of the yard for us to find, and he produced some western tack and got "Red" ready to demonstrate his skills. Andy loped (a slow canter) him around, ground to a halt, stood up on top of the saddle to show how I might look for a loose one in the distance, invited me to climb on behind, and then jumped off and left me to it. It was a good job that I'd already been told that he would accept £2,000 for him as I'd have paid whatever he asked.

Sadly, we soon learned that an entire horse, who had been performing stud duties for a few years in between his western displays, was not the ideal hack. He had an eye for the fillies and the colts were terrified of him.

I gelded him myself and, while he may have had reason to regret that decision, I did not. Not even when I bought a book on British Quarter Horses and read that "the pure American line now exists in Britain through just one sire, Cheydawn Red". Our "Red".

He gave us many years of great service and I could ride him up the road in the morning while reading the Sporting Life. The ultimate hack for a trainer. But, by the turn of the century, now in his late teens, he was having issues with arthritic fetlock joints. I was riding him less and less and he needed some anti-inflammatories to make him able for his job.

At Christmas in 2001 we headed off to a dude ranch in Arizona for the festive season and there we met the Horan family from Kent. Tina, a lawyer, had developed a passion for dude ranching



Mark with Red in the 1990s

and western riding and dragged her family along every year. She admitted that she wasn't the most confident of riders and all she wanted to do was steady hacking, western style. A perfect retirement home for Red. We packed him off to Tina with a good supply of "bute", a promise of free supplies as and when he needed it, and an undertaking to take him back whenever he was no longer fit for what Tina wanted to do with him. If I am honest, I firmly believed that that would be his last home and, if we ever took him back, it would be to put him down.

**T**HE request for "bute" soon dried up but reports were that Tina was very happy with Red and that he was doing all required of him. Tragically, Tina died in 2010 having told her family that her beloved Red must be

# Straight Talking

returned to Mark Johnston as promised.

We duly collected him, with me still assuming that our role would be to make the difficult decision of ending his life as he must, by now, surely, be riddled with arthritis and in constant pain. We could not believe how well the 26-year-old looked. Putting him down was absolutely out of the question. But what could he do? I am a great believer in horses having a job in life to keep them healthy and it had clearly been working for Red.

### Tragedy

Around the same time there was a terrible accident in Middleham when a delivery van, with the driver blinded by the sun, drove into the back of long-time Middleham resident, retired farrier Dougie Jemmeson when he was out riding. Our vet James Tate had to rush from our yard to euthenase the horse, which had both hind legs broken and other catastrophic injuries. Dougie, who was in his early 80s at the time, was in a serious condition as well, with multiple fractures, and it was said that he would never ride again. A tragedy for him and all of us in Middleham as he has been a regular on Middleham Moor every day on his horse since long before I started



Yard Manager Hayley Kelly with Red at home again - still looking good at 35!

training.

Deirdre went to visit him in hospital and said that she might just have the horse to get him back riding. He wasn't convinced, but when she rode it down to his yard, bareback, in a halter, he fell for him as I had done 17 years earlier. The pair, with a combined age of about 109 when they began their association, became regulars on the moor.

Another riding accident, of a relatively

minor nature, when Red stumbled, made Dougie decide to hang up his boots a couple of years ago but he kept Red, well-fed and rugged when it was cold, until he had to give up his yard a few weeks ago.

So the great Cheydawn Red has returned to us, aged 35, and, to my eye, he looks magnificent for his age. What next, I wonder? Can anyone think of a job for him? Retirement doesn't suit him.

**P**HILIP ROLLS (see Kickback, p.7) is surprised by the number of column inches in the September Klarion devoted to "character assassination" of Matt Chapman. I was a little surprised myself but they were letters we received and, as Philip says, Matt Chapman's style is clearly intended to provoke a response. The response, in this case, was to a piece written by John Scanlon a month earlier but that, in turn, was a response to Chapman's disparaging remarks about Circus Maximus prior to his running in the Sussex Stakes.

Matt Chapman himself, didn't like the response either and accused me of running a hatred campaign against him in the Klarion. He bombarded me with 17 WhatsApp messages on the subject one evening in the space of 30 minutes and some of you might have noticed that that he preceded his comments on Ayr's Firth of Clyde Stakes, after it was won by Rose of Kildare, with "Mark thoroughly dislikes me anyway, so he's not going to like what I have to say". So, he's probably not going to like the fact that he features in

Kickback again this month and that one letter writer, Jane Knight, also takes exception to his style and his propensity for supporting his own opinions (usually derogatory) about people and their horses with wildly erroneous statements as if they were facts.

Well, Matt, I can tell you that this time I wholeheartedly agree with Jane Knight. She is right and you were wrong. But, regardless of that, I defend the right of the Kingsley Klarion team to publish letters and articles expressing opinions that are not mine. I often welcome it as it gives me something to write about. If you bothered to read the Klarion when you aren't featuring in it yourself, you would have found that I often disagree with John Scanlon's Off The Bridle piece. I can, of course, respect his opinion and think it is worthy of printing without agreeing with it.

Hopefully, we aren't expected to think that the producers of ITV racing and even the directors on the ITV board agree with everything Matt Chapman says. That really would be ridiculous.