

Keith calls it a day

Keith Dalglish, the record-breaking Scottish-based trainer and a former star apprentice jockey with the Johnston yard, has announced he plans to retire later this year. JOHN SCANLON spoke to him about his past and his future.

SINCE STARTING to train at Belstane Racing Stables in Carluke, South Lanarkshire in 2011, Keith, 39, has enjoyed enormous success, training almost 800 winners on the Flat

and more than 150 over jumps. And since 2014, he has broken the record for most Flat winners in a season by a Scottish-based trainer five times. In 2017 he became the first Scottish-based trainer to train 100 winners in a

calendar year.

But last month he caught all in British racing by surprise when announcing he planned to retire later this year. I caught up with him to look back on his early days in Middleham, and to look forward

to his plans for life after training.

Keith burst onto the racing scene as a 17-year-old apprentice with Mark Johnston Racing in 2000. He rode 285 winners in four seasons, but, standing 6 feet tall, he faced a constant battle with the scales.

In 2002, he posted a personal best score of 72 winners, including a German Group 1 on Yavana's Pace and a Royal Ascot success on Helm Bank. But the punishing regime of dieting, sweating and suppressing his appetite took a toll on the young Keith, and in the summer of 2004, at the age of just 21, he announced his retirement from the saddle.

He looks back on his achievements as a jockey for the yard with huge fondness.

'I owe Mark everything really,' he said.

'Quite simply, without everything he has done for me I wouldn't be in the position I am now. Jock Bennett also played a huge role in my early career. When I first arrived in Middleham we rode work together, and he gave me

the confidence to believe I had what it takes to become a successful jockey.'

Another to play a leading part in Keith's success was long-standing cog in the Johnston machine, rider Bobby Elliott.

'Bobby taught me so much,' recalls Keith, adding with a laugh: 'Some bad things as well as good!'

'He was a fantastic horseman, and he would talk to me constantly, telling me what I should be doing in different situations. He was a great help.'

Asked to name just one favourite horse from his Johnston days, Keith insisted on naming two.

'I got the ride on Yavana's Pace very late in his career, but we won that Group 1 in Germany together – well, he won it and I steered him. But I have to mention Gateman, too. Those two horses were so tough and genuine.'

'As a jockey, you knew you could kick for home a little earlier than usual and they would keep battling to the line.'

As a young jockey, Keith rode Attraction to two of her wins, and although he never partnered Shamardal on the racecourse, he recalls a special moment when he partnered that star colt in a gallop at home.

'I worked him in a gallop on the grass and he gave me such a feel,' he recalls. 'I'd never had a feel like it before. Mark likes to tell the tale that I said afterwards it wasn't a case of whether the colt would win, but where would he like it to win! I was usually very quiet, and often I would just nod, so I think he knew it was a bit special!'

AS for his favourite racecourse, Keith nominates Hamilton Park.

'It's my local track and we have had a fair bit of success there,' he explains. 'They also do a great job for trainers and owners there.'

When Keith started training, he brought to the job much of what he had learned at Johnston Racing.

'Mark taught me the importance of consistency in training horses,' he explains. 'Horses need routine, they



Keith Dalglish

need to go out in all weathers and have regular work routines, and, like Mark, I'm a great believer in racing them often if they are fit to race.'

His philosophy has brought a consistent level of success, and he's proud of that record. As for whether he preferred riding or training, he is genuinely torn.

'That's a tough question,' he admits.

'Riding is certainly less stressful, but if I had to pick one or the other, I'd say training.'

It's greatly to Keith's credit that despite the success he has achieved in the training ranks and his pride in a job well done, he is able to look at the bigger picture and contemplate a major change in direction.

Asked what he'll miss most about training, he answers immediately.

'It's the arrival of the cheque from Weatherbys if we've had a good month!' he laughs.

And the worst aspect of the training life?

'It's the responsibility that comes with it.'

At the age of 39, Keith has decided it's time to take a break from that responsibility.

'I want more time for myself and my family, it's as simple as that,' he says.

Keith feels there is just too much racing, and it's spread over too long a week. 'If I could change one thing about racing, it would be that racing should be only staged over five days of the week.

It would benefit everyone in the industry.'

So, at some stage later this year, Keith will take the plunge and relinquish his training licence. He, wife Christine and daughters Poppy (14), Daisy (12) and May (2) have plans to travel.

'The girls all want to go to France, and it'll be nice to do a bit of travelling as a family', he says.

But there are plenty of other plans too. He has been bitten by the cycling bug and has lots of bike rides lined up.

'We also have some Hebridean sheep and I'm sure they'll keep us occupied. I might even have a go at growing some vegetables.'

Asked if this is to be a temporary break from training, Keith has an open mind. 'When I finish I hope to leave the door open, but it's not part of the plan. We'll see what happens, and even if I want to keep working with horses, it doesn't need to involve training.'

Keith has always kept up to date with events at Kingsley Park, and he has some words of advice for Charlie Johnston as he embarks on his career as sole licence holder at the yard.

Aware that training can be a 24/7 existence, Keith says Charlie must make sure he finds some time for himself.

'Make sure you find time for your hobbies,' he advises.

All at Kingsley Park send their best wishes to Keith and his family as their new adventures await. ■



Keith and Yavana's Pace