

THE JOCKEY

Jump veteran Vince Slattery on groupies, cheats and coming last - again...

When did you realise you wanted to become a jockey?

I was fairly tall until I was about 11 or 12 - it was actually my ambition to play rugby for Ireland, but I got left behind in the height stakes and by the age of 14 I'd switched to horse racing.

What made you go pro?

With everything I've ever done, I've looked for a way to make money out of it - if you work hard enough at anything, you can get some cash. In the long run, jockeys who ride on the flat earn a lot more money than those who jump - I do both.

Are you minted, then?

Nah. I get £65 for a flat race, and jumping would be £85. I try to get five or six rides a week, so it pays the bills. Frankie Dettori earns exactly the same per ride that I do - it's sponsorship that makes the big difference.

What do you think of Dettori?

Well, he can be a right miserable bastard. He'll come into the room with two winners, and I'll have come in last, but I'll be cheerier than him. A lot of jockeys pussyfoot around him, but when he comes in I'll just tell him to go into the corner and shut up. You need to take him down a peg or two.

Have you ever tried to master a flamboyant dismount like his?

Well, it wouldn't look so good on the jockey that comes in last, would it?

Er, no. How does it feel when you do get a win?

Well, I struggle to get good rides. I've only won 160 times out of about 4,000 races, which isn't great. People sometimes look at my percentage and say, "God, you must be useless."

So why would anyone put you on their beloved steed?

I'm very honest. I'm not lying when I say a horse is shit.

But what are the likes of Dettori doing right that you're doing wrong?

The truth is, a lot of it's down to the horses. And I've ridden a lot of bad horses. Frankie is a very good rider, but if you place a different jockey on whatever he's riding, the form nearly always stays the same. You need a good horse and you need the ability to take the right gap in the race.

And you need to be able to stand the pressure. Dettori can take it. He thrives on it.

Are you bigger than him?

I'm reasonably tall for a jockey. I'm 5ft 5in, and there are quite a few five-footers. As a general trend, jockeys are getting taller over the years.

Have midgets ever got into the sport?

No, they don't have the right build. They tend to be a bit stockier than us.

What do you do to get your weight down before a race?

Jockeys often sweat for about 30 minutes in the sauna immediately before a race, and although pee pills [diuretics] are illegal now, you can still take laxatives.

Do jockeys ever crap themselves mid-race?

Not that I know of, no. The most embarrassing thing that's happened to me is getting on the wrong horse. And every jockey dreads taking the wrong course. Thankfully, I'm

So do you compensate for the lack of food by doing drugs and booze?

Jockeys do like a drink. Before a race, I'll have a gin and tonic. I save my pint of lager for afterwards - that's my big luxury. I suppose drugs must be a temptation, because it's a rush that's not food and not booze. I suppose it's one vice that doesn't make you fat. But I've never been offered them.

Will racing ever be a glamorous sport?

Some fellas iron creases into their socks and put gel in their hair - even though the helmet goes straight on over their daft hairdo. And to some punters it is quite glamorous - there's groupies, for example, hanging around waiting to be taken home. And of course, the better the jockey, the prettier the bird. So only the ugliest come anywhere near me...

Q What do you think of Frankie Dettori?

A Well, he can be a right miserable bastard

usually so far behind I've got plenty of time to figure out where to go. I just follow the other horses.

Do you have any slimming secrets for our lardier readers?

Yeah, don't eat.

Anything less drastic?

When I can eat, I'll eat. But if I'm going to race, I don't let anything pass my lips. I don't like it, but I've got used to it. Believe me, if there was a secret to getting your weight down, a jockey would have found it.

Is it like the modelling industry? Do you go into the changing room and moan about the size of your arse?

No, we don't really talk about stuff like that. We're men. And we don't use the word "diet," either. We "waste hard" for a day. After a race, though, you'll stuff yourself with Mars bars and whatever you can get your hands on.

Do you all have massive eating disorders, then?

I wouldn't call it a disorder, because we know exactly what we're doing. But it's not a healthy lifestyle.

Are jockeys' wives anything like footballers' wives? And are they allowed to wear heels?

Some of the ladies are very glam - you can tell they're not with the jockey for his looks. But none of us have a problem with our height, and a lot of the lads are with taller girls. As they say, you can chop up any length of tree-trunk once it's been felled...

Eh? Do you ever feel like a horse has really got it in for you?

I don't take a crap horse personally, but the other day a jockey called Timmy Murphy hurled his stick at a horse after it threw him, and got a seven-day ban. I've done that sort of thing, but I'm so far behind the rest of the pack that no one notices. It's like sitting at the back of the classroom, you can get away with everything.

What's the worst thing you've ever said to a horse in anger?

"I fucking knew I was going to fall, you stupid fucking animal."

Have you done yourself much damage over the years?

Well, I count myself lucky that I still

have my teeth. Getting a hoof in the face is a pretty familiar injury to any jockey. I've also broken my collarbone five times, and once broke my leg in seven places. But some people fall worse than others, and I like to think I take falls okay.

What makes a person good at falling?

Well, the ladies make terrible fallers. Men just accept it and hit the ground in a roll. Women tend to flail about and they finish up all sprawled in the grass. Then they lie there in a kind of come-and-help-me position, and next thing you know nine horses have galloped straight over them. We lads sit and wince from the sidelines.

Do you have a particular fence that gets you every time?

Yes, at Ludlow. We call it "Trappy Trevor". It's the first fence in the straight, and if the fence doesn't catch you out, two strides later there's a ditch that gets you.

Have you ever shot a horse?

No, but I've held them still while they've been shot. If your horse breaks a leg, the only thing to do is sit on his head and pin him down until the vet gets there. There's nothing worse than an injured horse staggering around on a broken limb.

How easy is it to fix a race?

Bloody hard on the horses I ride! But I have to say they've got a lot stricter in recent years. Stewards are quick to spot an unusually poor performance. I was investigated after a race back in 1991. My story remains that I did try to win it, but the important people decided I didn't try hard enough. The next time I rode that horse as hard as I could... and still finished in the same place. I suppose that horse was a good bit cleverer than me.

So you're not wildly successful, and not making a packet. What keeps you at it?

When there's a jump a few seconds away, and you know you're going over it one way or another, it's an unbelievable rush. Riders who quit just can't find anything to replace the adrenalin. The big example is Richard Dunwoody. He's tried everything. He's raced cars, even walked to the North Pole in minus 50 temperatures, but he's struggling to replace the thrill of racing. **FHM**

Interview by Anna Hart.



The giant gecko took a greedy glance at his next tasty snack