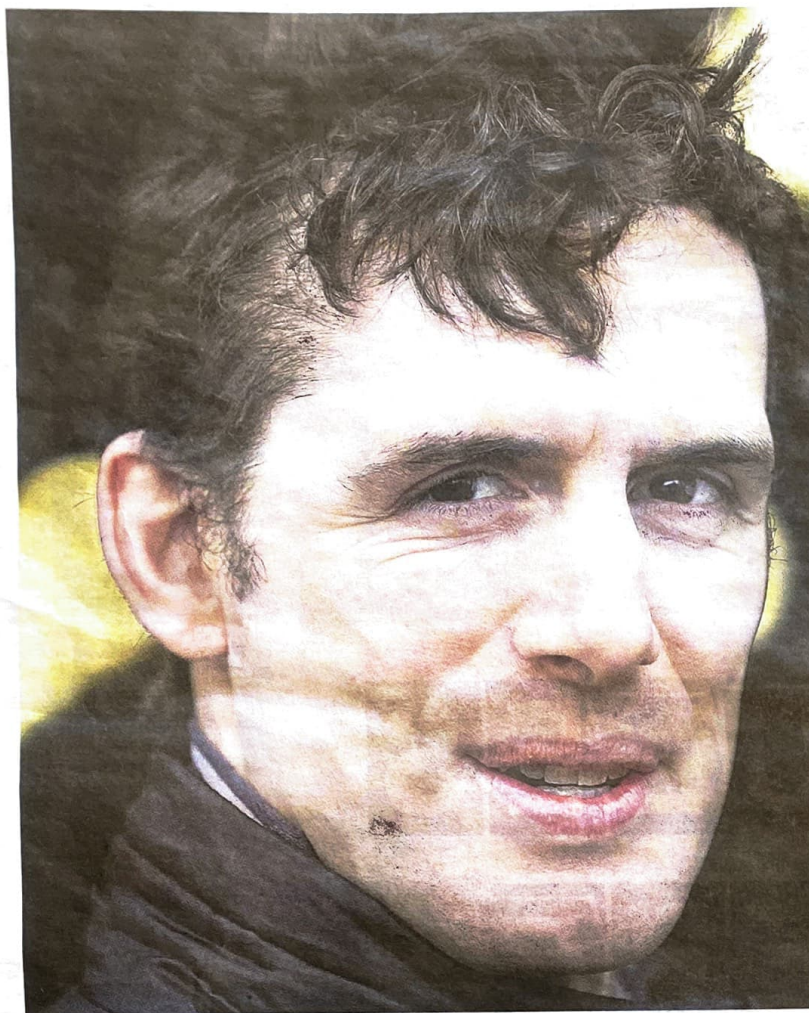


INTERVIEW DAVID BASS



'There was a lot of self-loathing – I went down a dark road'

The Grade 1 winner discusses challenges facing riders with Lewis Porteaus



LIFE is full of surprises. Take the Clarence House Chase at Ascot last month as a case in point. All that was up for discussion before the race were the merits of Politologue, Waiting Patiently and Defi Du Seuil. Then First Flow comes along and leaves the 'big three' in his wake with a daredevil performance Evel Kniesel would have been proud of.

The man who partnered First Flow is another surprise package. At 32, and with a stable full of exciting horses at Kim Bailey's yard to ride, David Bass is a jockey in a good place.

Operating at a 19 per cent strike-rate, on the cusp of 50 winners for the season and making his mark in the big races, it is easy to believe he has never ridden better. If visual evidence were needed, take another look at his ride on First Flow at Ascot.

Brave enough to take on Champion Chase winner Politologue down the back straight, Bass sees a stride at

almost every fence and is not shy in asking First Flow to take them. It was bold, almost brazen at times, but it highlighted perfectly the conviction he is riding with at present.

"Ascot was amazing and I'm still trying to enjoy it really," says the man in question, up and running at his home in Swindon after a few technical issues with Zoom. "I was lucky enough to ride Sprinter Sacre, probably the best two-mile chaser we've ever seen, but I don't think I've ever enjoyed a two-mile chase as much as I did at Ascot. It was exhilarating and a lot of fun."

Galloping on to Cheltenham in March, he says: "If Chacun Pour Soi gets there in one piece he's the one to beat, and you can never write Altior off, but, to be honest, it's just great to be talking about a horse good enough to run in the Champion Chase – I feel lucky that I'm able to ride good horses like that."

"It's like Kim said this morning: a few years ago we'd have been thinking about Ludlow on a Thursday and now we're talking about horses going to Cheltenham. I'm just trying to enjoy those good horses running against the best opposition in the best races."

Bailey and Bass have come a long way together since their paths crossed by chance at Towcester on a bank holiday Monday in 2014. It was an inconspicuous introduction but

almost seven years later, they have forged a winning partnership.

"It was a spare ride and Kim was looking for a jockey," he recalls. "I'm good friends with Ed Cookson, who used to be a conditional at Kim's, and he put my name forward for the ride."

"I weighed out at Towcester and said hello to Kim. He said: 'I don't know who you are and I've never heard of you, but Ed seemed to think you're all right'."

"It was a horse called Crazy Jack in a maiden chase. He ended up winning and then I started riding out once a week at Kim's yard and that's how the ball got rolling."

Two more contrasting characters you could not meet. While Bailey is full of dry humour and needs little

encouragement to share his thoughts, his stable jockey is a deep thinker who has invested in understanding his own mind. They are an unlikely pairing but the combination works.

Bass says: "You need to get the hang of Kim's character and sense of humour quite quickly and I suppose I've managed to do that and we seem to make it work."

"It's been amazing to see the progression in the last few years. The quality in the yard has got better and better. It hasn't all been smooth sailing as far as being stable jockey is concerned but Kim's been loyal to me and I really enjoy being part of a big team down there. It's been enjoyable to watch it grow and we're now an established yard that competes on the big days and it's been nice to be part of that."

A relative latecomer to the sport having only decided at 16 to sign up for the British Racing School in Newmarket and go all out to become a professional jockey, he has built a reputation for being proactive in the saddle.

The way he goes looking for the next fence or hurdle is more in the ilk of AP McCoy or Richard Johnson than Ruby Walsh and Paul Carberry, but his zestful approach certainly seems

to suit the likes of First Flow at Bailey's yard in Gloucestershire.

"I've always had a positive attitude," says the rider, whose father Philip is a music teacher and mother Rowena a vicar. "I try to ride on instinct but can see why I might get pigeon-holed as one-dimensional sometimes. I believe I don't have to ride all horses the same way but I like to be positive."

"I think Kim would like me to be a bit more patient sometimes but I know the horses really well, which is why I like being part of that team. I ride a lot of work on them, school them all the time and that gives me confidence at the races."

"Sometimes when Kim watches he's probably pulling his hair out but he leaves it to me most of the time and I've found a comfortable way of riding and a style that suits me. You've got to find your own style."

THE horse who cemented the Bass-Bailey partnership was Darna, who landed the Plate at the Cheltenham Festival in 2015 (left). After some near misses for his former boss Nicky Henderson, it was a welcome first success at jump racing's biggest meeting for the man in the saddle.

In April the following year, now established as Bailey's stable jockey, he gave The Last Samurai as bold a ride as you could see around Aintree

'It's a job that has for too long been seen as a long road of suffering that leads to success, which isn't necessarily helpful'



EDWARD WHITAKER (RACINGPOST.COM/PHOTOS)



'What I would like to see is for us to get to a stage where we're able to discuss our mental wellbeing'

Landmark day in the saddle: David Bass pushes out the Kim Bailey-trained First Flow to win the Grade 1 Clarence House Chase at Ascot

started having more success but I definitely think it helped.

"I want to be as good as I can be and keep trying to improve, but I don't think about whether I'm one of the top riders or how many winners I've ridden, because that's another way of thinking that doesn't necessarily help me enjoy what I'm doing.

"I feel I'm enjoying race-riding more than ever now and that's the most important thing to me."

There is certainly plenty to look forward to over the next month and a half for the Northamptonian, who, along with First Flow in the Champion Chase, is set to partner leading Ryanair Chase fancy Imperial Aura and, potentially, their Bailey-trained stablemate Vindication in the Gold Cup at Cheltenham.

"I'm unbelievably lucky," says Bass, who will be looking to add to his three festival wins come March. "I feel I'm in a privileged position to be riding for a yard that has horses like we do. I will make sure that I enjoy this period as much as I can because I know how hard it is to find horses good enough to compete in Grade 1s."

While First Flow is the new kid on the two-mile chase block and Vindication a stayer of considerable potential, it is possible that Imperial Aura could be the horse that ultimately defines his rider's career.

He landed the now defunct 2m4f novice handicap chase at last year's festival and made light work of his task in Grade 2 company at Ascot in November.

Uncharacteristically, Imperial Aura unseated his partner at Kempton last month but he remains one of the most exciting chasers in Britain. The Ryanair is his favoured target this season but he has the hallmarks of a Gold Cup horse of the future.

"He's a very good horse and when I rode him at Carlisle first time out this season, I thought this horse feels like he could be a Grade 1 horse now," says Bass, fully engrossed in Imperial Aura.

"He's one of the best jumpers I've ever ridden and Kempton was just another thing racing does to you. I don't like to make excuses but I'm convinced he was put off by the shadow of the wing a little bit. The main thing is he's okay. I think he can win a Ryanair and, if he can go really close in that, then maybe we can think of the Gold Cup next year."

Rather than feeling any pressure, you get the sense he is relishing the countdown to Cheltenham and the chance to test Bailey's all-stars with the best in class.

"The most important thing is for my passion for race-riding to remain as it is," he concludes. "What I really want is the passion I have for my job at the moment to stay this strong for a few more years."

With the support of a stable packed full of exciting youngsters, hopefully his new-found passion will burn bright for a good while longer yet.

to finish second in the Grand National. From the outside, he appeared to be living his dream. In truth, he was trapped in a nightmare and his mental health was rapidly deteriorating.

"I'd say for years leading up to that Grand National I was mentally fragile but that was the end of a long struggle," he reveals. "We talk about how winning a race like the Grand National leaves a legacy and when you're beaten you spiral into blaming yourself and believing that you've let everyone down. There was a lot of self-loathing after that. I got banned as well in that race and wasn't happy with the way I was riding.

"I went down a dark, self-sabotaging road after that. Sometimes it's after your biggest defeat when you learn a lot more about yourself and I definitely learned a lot about myself after finishing second in the National.

"I was depressed. There's no other way of looking at it and the hardest thing I've ever done was seek help for it. I felt embarrassed doing it, which is something I feel needs to be changed in racing."

Despite being at his lowest point, Bass thankfully found the strength to reach out for help and has been speaking to the same sports psychotherapist ever since. He has managed to change his entire philosophy and approaches his day job from a completely different

perspective. Whereas once the pressure to succeed was sucking the joy out of winning, he is now focused on his passion for race-riding and the enjoyment it brings him.

"I've had help for the past five years now and I think it really helps me," he says. "I'm always trying to work on the mental wellbeing side of the job because it's something that in the past wasn't positive.

"We feel as if we need to suffer to justify any sort of success, or at least that's how I've felt in the past. I felt like I needed to drive all over the place to ride out, ride with broken bones, do all the light weights possible, punish myself when I didn't win on a horse and suffer to be successful.

"I suppose I've come to realise that it's not necessarily that healthy to keep going along with that mindset. Of course it's a tough job and you have to have a level of resilience to do it but, for me, I needed help to mentally look after myself."

Last year was a hard one to be a member of the weighing room family. Riders past and present, James Banks and Liam Treadwell, took their own lives and their loss certainly had a profound impact on Bass.

The thought of more of his colleagues suffering in silence is an unsettling one and, while he is uneasy about the possibility of creating negative headlines for racing,

he is willing to speak out about his own experience with depression in the hope of making it less of a taboo subject within the sport.

"I still think there's a stigma there," he says. "As much as I don't want attention from it, it's an issue I think needs to be discussed in the right way. There's certain groups in racing that have worked really hard. I got help through the PJA, and Racing Welfare has worked really hard, but there's an underlying culture and way of thinking that I think we've got a lot of work to do to change it. It's the stigma of asking for help.

"Ten years ago when I was a conditional jockey, I'd be thinking how ridiculous it is talking to someone about your mental health. I look back at how I viewed things then and it's quite worrying really - you're a jump jockey, you suffer and you don't talk about it and that's just that.

"What I would like to see is for us to get to a stage where we're able to discuss our mental wellbeing. Until the past six months I'd rarely have a conversation with other jockeys, or anyone really, about mental health."

He continues: "I don't want to be too negative about racing as an industry. It's an amazing industry that has given me an amazing career, but I think racing is behind on this issue compared to other sports.

"We lost two jump jockeys last year from suicide and even now I still

don't think we talk about it enough. I don't want it in the press every day but I want it to be a normal conversation in everyday life in racing.

"It's a job that has for too long been seen as a long road of suffering that leads to success, which isn't necessarily helpful. A lot of people have changed their mentality but there's still a long way to go."

AFTER racing emerged from lockdown in late spring, he admits that he felt an increased pressure to hit the ground running and, as he raced around Britain in search of rides, his mental health suffered. A fractured and dislocated wrist in August snapped the cycle and gave him six weeks on the sidelines to recalibrate.

"I feel like I'm in a much better place now but it's something you need to work on," says Bass, who is pushing for jump racing to introduce a meaningful break in the calendar to allow participants and stable staff the chance to switch off.

"It's a bit like your physical health - if you want your fitness to improve you have to work on it and I do feel it's the same with your mental health.

"My approach to the job changed after my injury. I basically came back and made a conscious effort to enjoy it more. I'm not saying that's why I