

David Bass

There's more to this jockey than meets the eye, says *Catherine Austen*, as they chat about mental health, "date nights" and learning to love racing again



IT could be said that what defines a sportsman isn't success, but failure. The best learn from defeat, use it to improve and move on – quickly. When *H&H* speaks to David Bass at 10am on a Sunday morning, it is less than 24 hours since he was unseated at the second fence from odds-on favourite and 2020 Cheltenham Festival winner Imperial Aura in a Grade Two at Kempton. It would have been no surprise if he hadn't picked up the phone, but he does.

"Not a great day," he says with understatement – of his three other rides, one favourite was beaten into third and two were pulled up. "But I deal with it in a different way now. At one time I would have beaten myself up and gone over and over it; now I don't put myself through so much suffering. It doesn't do me or anyone close to me any good."

And it is inevitable that there will be low patches in what has so far been an excellent season for the 32-year-old. Days after this

interview, David landed the Grade One Clarence House Chase on First Flow. He has ridden 47 winners at the time of writing; fewer than 10 behind his best total of 55 in the 2018/19 season. His strike rate is 20% and, most importantly, plenty have come on good horses in good races. Many of them have been for his principal employer, Kim Bailey.

"The weighing room is a great place to be and it is a very accepting place, even for weird eco-warriors like me!"

"Kim's horses have been in great form; we've had more quality and have been winning decent races at big meetings. When the ability is there, it is easier to win races," says David.

THE past year has been something of an epiphany for him. He had three important rides on the first day of the 2020 Festival: Global Citizen, who ran well to finish fourth at 33/1 in the Arkle; Vinndication, joint-favourite in the Ultima Handicap Chase, whose fourth place left David "really gutted"; and then Imperial Aura, co-favourite in the Northern Trust Company Novices' Handicap Chase. The latter won by more than three lengths for David and Kim.

"I have left Cheltenham in a very, very dark mood lots of times," he says. "The pressure is massive. It's a place where when you get beaten on a horse that you think has a good chance, the disappointment is highlighted even more. I've worked on having a different mindset

David Bass comes from a non-horsey background and says it took time for him to learn how to trust a horse. Now he's a standing dish in the top races

National Hunt racing returned in July.

"I was so busy; much busier than normal for the time of year. I felt the pressure, and was essentially a 'busy fool', needing racing, not wanting it," he says.

But in August, David was injured in a fall and spent six weeks on the sidelines.

"It was interesting; when you're injured, you quite often learn a lot about yourself," he says. "You get impatient and feel like you need to come back. However, I got to the stage where I wanted it, not needed it. 'Need' is usually to do with everyone else, not yourself, but when I realised I wanted to come back, because race-riding is my passion, I saw that my attitude had changed. I don't need it for anyone except me – I love it.

"Since I came back from that injury, I have made a real effort to enjoy it more than ever before. I didn't expect to have the winners I have had this season; I just really wanted to enjoy the riding. I want to absorb it, to take in the moment."

Thoughtful words from an interesting man. His veganism and his strongly left-wing politics have sometimes made headlines, which perhaps says more about racing's narrow culture than it does about David Bass.

"I've been called every name under the sun," he says with a laugh. "The weighing room is a very masculine environment; it's been interesting to see lots of alpha males react to someone not eating meat.

"I've had some good conversations with some of them about the environment and diet [he originally went vegan for environmental reasons, and found it considerably improved his metabolism]. I might have had a slight influence, you never know.

"However, the banter is always light-hearted and good fun. The weighing room is a great place to be and it is a very accepting place, even for weird eco-warriors like me!"

DAVID'S background is quite different to many of his peers. His mother is a vicar who teaches the harp, and his father is also a classical musician, who teaches the viola and violin. Neither is horsey, although David's father took him racing as a child.

when I go there – but winning at Cheltenham is unlike anywhere else."

After Cheltenham, the country went swiftly into lockdown.

"I really enjoyed the first six weeks," says David. "I didn't sit on a horse, grew a beard... I've been a professional jockey for 10 or 11 years with no break. There's no off-season; we are on the go all year, which I think is crazy and wrong. It's a relentless schedule for jockeys, trainers, staff, horses, racecourses. So a lot of jockeys got a proper break and completely switched off from the grind last year.

"I tried to walk a lot, and learnt to cook properly – I'd always hated it and it stressed me out, but my girlfriend and I had a 'date night' every Saturday and I followed a recipe to the letter each time and cooked. I never would have done that if it hadn't been for lockdown!"

David wins on novice hurdler Does He Know, who is being primed for Cheltenham



"Race-riding is my passion": David returned from injury after a six-week break last year with a new-found love for the sport

"I wanted to be a jockey really badly when I was very young and had a few riding lessons, but I went off it and started playing football," he says. "I wasn't interested all the way through secondary school. Then all of a sudden, I was 16 and didn't have any plans, so I decided to try being a jockey and went to the racing school.

"I wasn't particularly natural – I learnt quickly how to ride like a jockey; I could copy how a jockey would ride quite easily, but as far as horsemanship was concerned, that took me longer."

He admits he found jumping hard at first.

"I didn't really know how to trust a horse. I wasn't a horseman, and it takes riding lots of different types of horses and young horses to learn how to become one. I still work very hard at it and am always looking at myself and trying to find ways to improve."

Time spent working for the highly eccentric trainer John Manners taught him a lot, and

