

KIM CAN SMILE AGAIN AFTER YEARS OF HELL

Jonathan Powell talks to trainer Kim Bailey about his remarkable turnaround

Comebacks from impossible odds are an essential part of jump racing's folklore. Few have been more inspiring than the tortuous journey which took Kim Bailey back to the winner's enclosure at the Cheltenham Festival last March after a drought stretching way back to 1999.

In the last decade of the twentieth century Bailey seemed to have the sport by the throat. The success of the flamboyant Mr Frisk in the 1990 Grand National in a blisteringly fast record record time was followed five years later by a double triumph at the Cheltenham Festival that was the stuff of dreams.

First up was Alderbrook, a raw novice, who landed an almighty punt for his Lambourn stable in the Champion Hurdle in soft ground on his third start over hurdles. Two days later Bailey's mud-loving chaser Master Oats jumped and galloped his rivals into submission in the Gold Cup.

At the time Bailey threatened to turn jump racing on its head. Perhaps, we wondered, he was the young man to challenge Martin Pipe and David Nicholson, the duo who dominated the trainer's championship at the time.

Yet within a couple of years Bailey's fortunes had changed so dramatically that it seemed the sky had fallen in.

Winners were in desperately short supply, his horses were sick, their owners were frustrated and he would appear at



the races with the measured tread of a condemned man on his way to the gallows.

"It was a horrendous period in my life," he recalls. "After two dreadful seasons in Lambourn with the horses suffering from a persistent lung infection I knew I was in desperate trouble because trying to train them when they are ill is impossible.

"The toughest part is trying to persuade your owners you are doing the right thing. Then you end up being persuaded to run horses that should not be anywhere near a racecourse.

"When someone is paying upwards of £10,000 a year it is so hard to keep saying

'sorry, sorry, he can't run'.

"Finally you hear mutterings that the horse might be on its way to another yard. So you think 'I might as well run it after all'.

"I lost two years in that way and knew I had to move in a hurry if I was to survive. If I stayed in Lambourn for another year I would have been out of business, no question. It was a decision that had to be made because my owners would have lost all confidence in me.

"In this business you can be forgotten very quickly because people have such short memories. There is a saying in racing that you are only as good as your last



Darna and David Bass win at Cheltenham for Bailey

winner....and it is horribly true.”

Nobody, though, should have doubted Bailey’s resolution as he found himself staring down the barrel of a gun.

He had already survived the break up of his marriage to his wife Tracey that was rarely out of the headlines, two seasons from hell and the worst dustbin-digging excesses of the tabloids and had emerged a warmer human being.

He reflects: “I am a great believer in fate. You think you are in control, then something happens that is beyond your influence.

“We all have bad luck from time to time but the sad part is that my downs were so badly publicised because of who else was involved. That made it all so much worse.”

It says much for Bailey’s generosity of spirit that he recruited Norman Williamson to ride many of his horses, following the jockey’s affair with his wife Tracey that fascinated the nation’s diary columns. Initially the rift between the two men seemed irreparable but eventually the trainer contacted his former stable jockey once more to ride their Gold Cup winner Master Oats in Ireland.

Soon they were working closely together again. Bailey recalls, “I could tell by the tone of Norman’s voice that he was delight-

ed when I broke the ice and rang him for Master Oats. Forgetting everything in our private lives we had always been good friends.

“What happened was unfortunate but I found after a period of time after our parting that things were quite difficult without him because we had enjoyed such a good rapport up to then. I missed the continuity of having someone on the horses who knew exactly what was going on.”

Bailey’s strategic withdrawal from Lambourn came at enormous cost. He viewed his new base at Preston Capes near Banbury early in 1999, finally gained planning permission in July, began building in August and, to his intense relief, moved with his horses and most of his old staff in November.

I can still remember the excitement in his voice as he showed me round a few months later.

“I suppose I could have walked away from racing. Although that would have been the easy thing to do it was never going to happen because I have always loved jump racing with a passion. I could not stop, simple as that. Even on the worst days in Lambourn I never suffered from Monday morning blues.

“Those early months at Preston Capes

felt like a bit of a trial period for me, almost like starting again from scratch.”

As we spoke it was clear Bailey believed beyond doubt that the move would revive his career but time would show that fate had dealt him another shockingly poor hand.

In the spring of 2000 he began to believe he might win a second Grand National with Betty’s Boy until the horse, a winner at the 1999 Festival, broke his hind leg in his final serious piece of work before Aintree.

If Bailey was hoping for a bright new dawn at Preston Capes in the new millennium he would be hugely disheartened. A freak storm washed away his expensively purchased all-weather gallop.

The foot and mouth disease that ravaged the countryside that spring added to his woes as he was unable to transport his horses to exercise on friends’ gallops.

In a period of a few weeks the bottom fell out of his business and he was left contemplating the wreckage of his dreams. Numbers of horses were badly down, owners melted away and winners were increasingly elusive.

Bailey soldiered on at Preston Capes, chiefly because he had sunk so much time, effort and hard cash into the place. Even-

Boardwalk and Tom Bellamy win at Towcester for Bailey



tually, though when he managed only three winners in 2007-8, he accepted that he must re-locate again if he was to continue as a racehorse trainer.

At that stage he had trained 24 winners in four years. His results offered a short cut to alternative employment yet once again, to his eternal credit, there was no question of quitting.

He insists: "There is no point in giving up on life. That has never been my way so it never entered my head to give up. You are only here once and you have to enjoy it. I love what I do and there is so much I still want to achieve."

With the full backing of his wife Clare the search began once more for suitable premises to train jumpers.

They finally settled on Thorndale Farm, set in a stunning location near Andoversford, high on the roof of the Cotswolds just a few miles from Cheltenham racecourse. A nine hole golf course lies in the valley below his gallops but Bailey is far too busy training winners again to spare time for such distractions.

Thorndale Farm has seen a long overdue revival in his fortunes these past few years and the reaction of the Festival crowd as he greeted Darna in the winner's enclosure last March after his success in the Brown Advisory and Merriebelle Plate offered tangible evidence of the popularity of the trainer at the home of steeplechasing. No wonder he says, "I am

as happy now as I have been for years. Moving here after so many setbacks put a huge spring in my step. People have said they saw a huge difference in me since I left Preston Capes. You don't forget how to train and I've had so much support since we've been here."

This spring Bailey has high hopes of The Last Samurai in the Grand National. More immediately he will fine tune his team for Cheltenham over the next few weeks though nothing he achieves in the future is likely to match the magic of that famous double in 1995 at the meeting which matters most in the jumping calendar.

He tells a moving story of the response from his father Ken the day Alderbrook won the Champion Hurdle.

"My dad was not very well and needed a stick as he walked up to me after the race. I remember the way he came up and kissed me.

"I had no intention of being emotional but immediately burst into tears because it was the first time he had done that since I went off to boarding school when I was eight.

"Two days later, after Master Oats won, he came up again, shook me by the hand and asked why it had taken me so long to train the Gold Cup winner!

"It was an amazing week because I had two horses that wanted bottomless going and they both were able to race on the softest ground that people can recall at the

Festival. I didn't expect to win the Champion Hurdle because I was asked to do something with Alderbrook which was impossible. Yet I achieved it. He was a decent horse on the Flat but had finished down the field on his only run over hurdles in a race for novices a couple of years earlier.

"Then I got a call from Ernie Pick in January saying he would send me a horse to win the Champion Hurdle. A horse needs a superb engine to become champion eight weeks after setting out, and he had it.

"Alderbrook's schooling at home had been out of this world before he won first time out over hurdles at Wincanton and Norman knew he was riding a Ferrari against the others at Cheltenham.

"You know I waited 16 years for a winner at the Festival and then won jumping's two most important races in three days.

"I'd say the triumph of Master Oats was the pinnacle of my career. The Gold Cup is the one for purists.

"His previous owner wanted to sell Master Oats so I put an advertisement in the *Sporting Life*, and a man called Paul Matthews bought him. I think he paid £18,000 plus VAT.

"Master Oats was quite slow but kept improving from modest beginnings. He wasn't the best jumper, either and made mistakes so we used to school him over poles but he kept galloping as you saw that day at Cheltenham." **RA**