

Obituary - Samuel Morshead

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Accident-prone jockey and racecourse manager who was once bitten by a decapitated conger eel



By his own estimation, Sam Morshead had 200 falls and 400 triumphs over jumps during a gung-ho 14-year career as a jockey that was as spirited as it was reckless. His determination was such that when he broke his wrist at Ludlow he persuaded the doctor to let him continue riding. He went on to win a race on Double Negative.

According to Kim Bailey, a prominent trainer, Morshead had natural talent and no shortage of courage. "He would kick all too often and as a result end up on the floor so that injuries became second nature," Bailey said. "The doctor pulled and twisted his wrist and you could hear it creak and crack. But Sam said it was fine . . . it was more important for him to ride a winner."

His mishaps included the Grand National. In 1977 he fortified himself by scooping up what looked like a full glass of champagne on his way to his horse. "To my horror it was a very old gin and tonic and the horrible taste stuck with me throughout," he wrote in his autobiography, *Racing Through Life*. "It was at Becher's [Brook] that once again my dreams came to a crashing end. I was foolishly going the brave man's route down the inside, where the drop was the biggest, and Brown Admiral could not stay on his legs."

Another fall, at Newbury, resulted in a collapsed lung. "A doctor appeared with a sharp, V-shaped blade. 'We have to do this to save your life; don't worry, it won't hurt.' And with that he stuck it straight through my ribcage."

Morshead was put on a life-support machine and was in hospital for two weeks. His mood was not helped by the fact that Peter Scudamore, an emerging jockey, took over his rides with great success. He never completely recovered. "I was living a fast-paced life and I loved every minute of it," he said.

"Eventually I had a bad fall at Worcester that broke seven teeth and seven bones in my face. The doctor told me that was it; I'd bashed my head enough and he called time on my career."

Morshead's bravado was not confined to racing. He shared a run-down cottage in Worcestershire with Bailey and Nigel Twiston-Davies, who also became a trainer, and decided that it would be a good idea if they showed him how to ski on the dry slope at Gloucester after a long Sunday lunch.

"Somehow he made it to the top. I told him to follow me down," Bailey said. "Bugger that for a lark," he replied, "I will race you down" — and he did, passing Bailey before halfway without having any idea how to stop. "Sam sailed off the end of the slope through the crash barriers and ended up in the car park below," Bailey recalled. "He did get up in one piece, with a broken ski, and was promptly chased off by some very angry attendants."

Another favourite pursuit was fishing. "Sam was overexcited when he landed a 20lb conger eel. He jubilantly chopped its head off and then went to retrieve the hook from its mouth. The head proceeded to bite him very hard and Sam turned white, stopped fishing and became very quiet," Bailey said. "Not so the spectators."

Samuel Rodd Morshead was born in 1955, the second son of Christopher Morshead and his wife, Anne. His father had won the Military Cross in Burma during the Second World War and in later life worked for the Metal Box Company in Dublin.

Not especially academic, Morshead was relieved to be spared Winchester College, the "family" school. While at St Columba's College in Dublin he was offered a ride at Punchestown, but failed to seek permission to leave school.

"He had completed the race when another trainer asked my father to ride as his jockey was injured," said Morshead's eldest son, Charlie. "This was the major chase and Dad won. He was pictured in The Irish Times and was duly called to see his housemaster, who, after a few stern words, said he wished he had known because he would have had a bet."

A captivating career was under way. Rambunctious living with Bailey and Twiston-Davies, however, came at a price — he was sacked by the trainer Fred Rimell. Two years later Morshead was reinstated. His most notable triumph came on Another Dolly in the 1980 Queen Mother Champion Chase. He also achieved successes at Cheltenham on Gaye Chance in 1981 and 1984. "It was, we thought, a fun time, but what we did not know were the struggles he went through, the depression and the anxiety that went with it," Bailey said.

After giving up riding, Morshead became a clerk of the course at Ayr, Kelso and Perth, where he was later to run the racecourse, one of the first professional jockeys to be given such a role. There he was renowned for throwing parties after the racing. "He was always on the mike," Bailey said.

He met his first wife, Annabelle Bates, a Northumberland sheep farmer, at the course at Hexham. They married in 1980 and had two children, Charlie, who runs his own event hire company, and Harry, who is a land agent. They were divorced in 1987. His second wife was Anthea Beaumont, an assistant trainer he met at the Scottish Grand National. They had a son, Henry, a student at the University of Exeter. Morshead was divorced again in 2008. He then married Sue Knott, whom he met in Perthshire. She died in 2015.

When told he had terminal cancer, Morshead called Bailey to prepare a eulogy and said his doctors had told him not to drive. His response was typical: "I am ringing while driving home in the outside lane, speeding while on my phone!"

Sam Morshead, MBE, jockey and racecourse manager was born on June 11, 1955. He died of lung and prostate cancer on September 25, 2018, aged 63