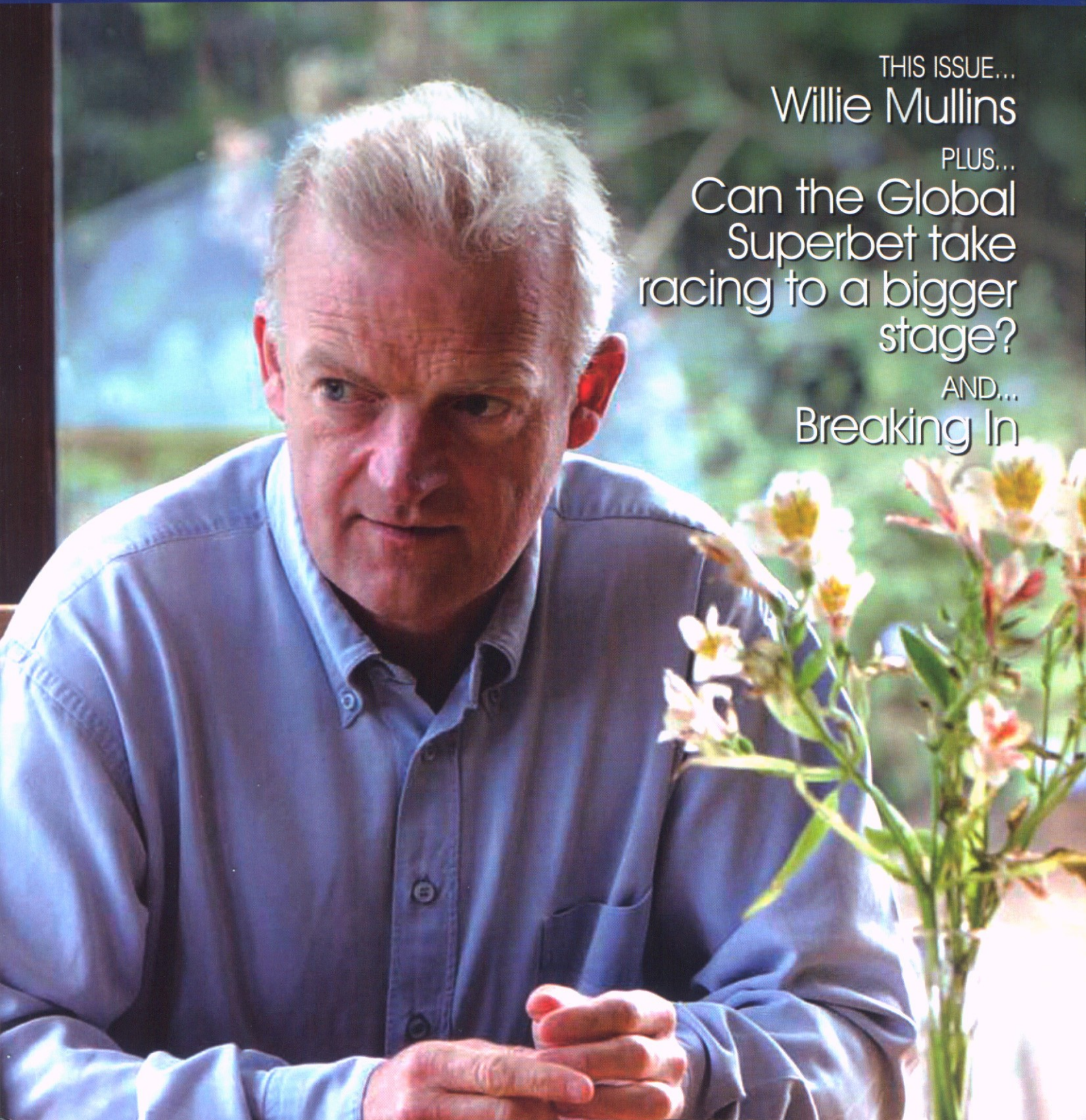


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FOR THE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE THOROUGHBRED



THIS ISSUE...

Willie Mullins

PLUS...

Can the Global
Superbet take
racing to a bigger
stage?

AND...

Breaking In



LISSA OLIVER MEETS **WILLE
MULLINS**



I've come to Willie Mullins' yard in County Carlow, Ireland, expecting to see some strong horses and to hear some strong opinions. With Hedgehunter trotting past me up to the gallops, I'm certainly not disappointed in the first instance. This is already second lot. Willie is behind schedule - "problems earlier on the gallops" - and should be under pressure. His phone won't stop ringing, he's got an interview to give and a runner in the first at Gowran Park. But Willie Mullins appears to have all the time in the world. I get the impression he's unflappable, but in fact he simply knows how to prioritise. His horses are given all the time they need, without question.

The horses circle and he watches them for two or three circuits. You might think there'd be no evident change in condition from the previous morning, but any change is discernible to Willie. As they canter past for a third time he begins to call out instructions. "Two on the big gallop; one; one; two; two on the short; one on the short..." The lads hold up the relevant number of fingers in confirmation and exit the ring as instructed. The art of conditioning a racehorse comes right down to the minute attention to detail Willie has just exhibited, though he makes it look effortless. Perhaps, by now, it really is second nature to him. Few trainers are so deeply in tune with their horses and it shows, not only in the overcrowded trophy shelves in the kitchen, but as we walk back through the yard, the equine heads following his progress intently and ignoring, as one, the visitor.

Of course, Willie's greatest asset is his staff. Like most yards these days he employs a very cosmopolitan mix, with men and women from Ireland, the Ukraine, Poland, England and France. "To get staff from the EU a school needs to be set up to train them and provide them with the necessary skills," Willie points out, "whereas you could go straight to countries outside of the EU, such as Russia, South

America and Pakistan, where racing has been established for a very long time and the staff have a vast experience with thoroughbreds and already possess the skills we require."

And now, away from the horses, it's time to hear those famous strength of opinions, to find out what really hinders Willie's job as a trainer; what frustrates him about today's industry regulations and what political changes he'd like to see made within the racing establishment. Willie sits back and smiles. But, like his horses, he is never going to get wound up.

"There's been so much tinkering with the rules over the years and you're never going to get a rule to suit everyone," he says realistically. "I've got to the stage now where some days it will suit you and some days it won't, and I don't think there's anything that really annoys me as much as maybe things used to. I just find you win some, you lose some. And the governing bodies are doing their best to make rules to suit the times we live in. If there is a problem then I think it's the long delay in implementing change. With telecommunications being so fast it's hard to understand why this should be. I often think if we have a problem and something needs changing it should be changed within six or eight weeks, but in actual



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fact by the time it goes forward to the governing body and it gets discussed it takes about two years. But I think HRI is better at changing things that need to be done quickly, it's far more receptive and probably more professional than previous governing bodies.

"I think we are quite lucky in Ireland with our governing bodies. HRI has evolved from HRA, which got the running of racing from the Turf Club, and we're also very lucky that our government views racing as such a strong Irish tradition. Consequently a lot of people in the government and the opposition have a huge interest in racing and our prize money levels have dramatically increased over the past ten years as a result."

Asked if there is any one thing he would change about racing, Mullins seems surprisingly content. "In the general spin of things, probably harmonisation of rules in Europe and the rest of the world," he says, after much thought. "Flat trainers travel more than National Hunt trainers, and jockeys travel all the time, so it would be better to have harmonisation within the rules, especially the rules of race-riding. That seems to cause most controversy. When punters are viewing a head-on film and stewards in different countries reach different conclusions, maybe it could be better explained to punters. But I think the Irish and English system is quite good at the moment, while the French seem to still have an old-fashioned type of view. Certainly, I would rather see more harmonisation in European rules."

When it comes to harmonisation of rules, medication seems to be another issue at the top of the list. "I think it's fairly right in Ireland and England, where all horses are tested, the winners and other random horses. America has a different system, but then maybe it suits their racing. I'm not too familiar with the problems of dirt racing and keeping horses sound. They seem to have a lot of problems with bursting, that may just be the barn system and the horses don't get enough air. It's not as big a problem certainly on this side of the world. Obviously I had trouble with morphine contamination and, you know, I was amazed at the different interpretation of the rules by different governing bodies, even though the rules appear to be the same, with zero tolerance. But some countries' interpretation of zero differs from others. And then there's the way the different laboratories give the results of their testing; some have a different method of testing, which can lead to a bit of confusion. But we can see things being harmonised all the time and that can only be good for racing."

Which leads to the question of travelling. Has it got any easier? "Certainly. The bureaucracy has got easier; it's just a matter of getting used to it. Maybe if it's your first or second time going abroad you can get caught out with little rules and regulations and things, but it's a matter of just setting in place the A, B and C of what you've got to do and it becomes second nature. When we have a horse entered in England my secretary has a particular protocol to carry out and it works out well enough. When you have things like foot and mouth and any other diseases it makes things difficult. You just need to plan in advance. It's difficult, but once you know what you're doing it's not insurmountable."

Not insurmountable, perhaps, but does it pay? "In France they have prize money down to seventh; in England and Ireland we prefer to give help to people travelling, even though our prize money's only down to fourth," Willie points out. "I would rather see our prize money in bigger races go down to sixth and maybe

even further down. It would also help to prevent four or five runner races. You take the Irish Derby, for example: prize money goes down to tenth. That normally ensures you have at least ten runners and probably eleven. And that's a big help for sponsors and I would prefer to see that in some of the National Hunt races. Our prize money should go down to lower places, it's an incentive. Our top horses are the top horses in their sphere and even if they're not in the first three they should still be getting prize money. You go through a lot of horses before you get a good one and they should be rewarded."

"In Ireland we probably have too many owners and too many horses at the moment. We're in a situation where we're balloting horses and we haven't enough races or prize money for the horses that we have in training. In order to keep our prize money levels up we can only have the amount of races that we currently have, otherwise we dilute the prize fund - and we had enough of that years ago. Everyone made an effort to get into proper prize money, which we have now. But because people now can buy a horse for three or four thousand and race for ten, we now have too many horses. Racing is all about mating the best to the best to produce the best and I don't see why we should provide opportunities for those who don't quite make it. Every horse is entitled to a few runs, to establish whether they're good or bad, but I don't think bad horses are entitled to big prize money just because someone puts them in training. There has to be a cut-off point. We just can't keep having racing for every horse that's produced. The onus shouldn't be on racing to provide opportunities for him.

"We're unique in Ireland in that we have enough owners and horses, thanks to the work HRI and Thoroughbred Marketing have done, and our government has also encouraged people, providing grants to upgrade our tracks and upgrade our racing. You always need new owners coming in, but we've plenty at the moment and we've an oversupply of horses. I don't want to knock the breeding industry, I don't care if they breed twenty thousand horses a year, but we can only cater for maybe six to eight thousand in Ireland. So I think we need to raise the bar a little bit, which our authorities are doing, so that



horses that are good enough have a competitive chance of earning their owners prize money. Racing has to regulate its own standard and we are able to keep a standard because we're a small country. There are plenty of other countries in the world where lesser horses can be exported to, lots of young countries starting up racing, and that's where I see those horses going. Hopefully if China ever gets going there'll be a huge market there."

On a more domestic level feed merchants have been sending out alarming letters across the country and it seems feeding may have to become more cosmopolitan, too.

"This year we've had an extraordinary year with the harvest being so bad and very little hay being saved," Willie explains, "a lot of trainers in Ireland are buying American and Canadian hay, and I'm told that there wasn't a huge amount of hay saved in France either because it was such a wet summer. And our costs this winter will rise dramatically. Hopefully it's just a blip for one year and we'll have to ride it out, but feed costs are always rising and

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Willie Mullins with his father Paddy Mullins and son Patrick Mullins looking at the trophy Patrick won in the Denny Havasnack, at Tralee, on Diago Garcia on 1st August 2006. A trophy that was previously won by Willie on Future Hero.

WE HAVE FOUND IT VERY HARD TO GET STAFF OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, PARTICULARLY WITH THE CELTIC TIGER CAUSING A LOT OF PEOPLE TO GO INTO OTHER INDUSTRIES

the cost of labour is always rising, too.

"We have found it very hard to get staff over the past few years, particularly with the Celtic Tiger causing a lot of people to go into other industries. We have had to import staff from both inside and outside the EU, and we're constantly in consultation with the department of foreign affairs about importing non-EU staff. Horse riders, certainly work riders, is quite a specialised skill and while you can

teach someone to ride a horse in maybe a matter of months, bringing them up to the level required to ride work and school is something that's only gained after years and years of experience. Consequently we find that we're employing people from Russia and Pakistan and South America, where there are thriving racing industries and lots of people with these skills who are quite keen to come and work in England and Ireland.

"The EU is getting bigger, but we still find that there aren't enough skilled people. The staff are being soaked up in England and France before we get them. We're at the end of the line, on an island out in the Atlantic! A lot of Polish and Czechoslovakian people are going to France and Germany first. That could be why we find we have to go further afield. The most difficult part is just the red tape in bringing them in. You want a person next week or the week after and find that it takes three or four months to actually get these people in. Even then, it's constantly being changed by civil servants. At the drop of a hat they might stop importing people or they might only let a certain amount of people come in, which has to be divided among everyone. They might only let fifty to a hundred people in during a certain three-month period. I can



Jackie Mullins with son Patrick (right) and nephew Emmett Mullins (both keen jockeys) at the Goffs Sales.

IF YOU RAISE THE WEIGHTS UP TO 10ST THEN FELLOWS WHO ARE 11ST ARE STILL GOING TO WASTE DOWN TO 10ST, IT'S JUST A FACT OF LIFE

see their point, too, because a lot of trainers were importing non-EU people as riders when maybe they weren't riders and they were just being used as cheap labour. When that gets back to civil servants of course they say, 'here, this is a racket!' A lot of responsibility is with our own trainers who maybe imported people they shouldn't have."

Recruiting staff is all the harder these days due to a general increase in weight throughout the population. "Weight-wise in Ireland we've raised the minimum weight to 8st 4lb and it's helped, but a lot of the lightweight jockeys have been put out of business and have gone to England. You can't just keep raising the weights, I imagine people are just going to keep getting bigger and bigger and there's always going to be a certain amount of people who can do the weights. You're never going to stop jockeys from wasting, if you raise the weights up to 10st then fellows who are 11st are still going to waste down to 10st, it's just a fact of life. But what's happened now in Ireland is that the better jockeys have the whole thing cornered and it's harder for the younger lads to get a foot on the ladder.

"In the last few years we have given riders longer to ride out their claim, which I think has stopped the turnover of riders. Middling riders can keep a claim and keep



Willie Mullins with Ruby Walsh at Gowran Park Racecourse

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getting rides, whereas beforehand they lost their claim at maybe forty winners and if they weren't able to ride without their claim the younger riders got the chance. With a greater turnover you've a better chance of getting new stars coming up. With riders keeping a claim for a long time trainers are always willing to put them up: 'he's not too bad and can claim five.' If they lost their claim quicker the jockeys who hadn't the ability to ride without their claim would be found out quicker."

All of which makes perfect sense and it's easy to see why Willie Mullins is held in such respect. Feed, staff and depth of woodchip, every trainer has his own method. But it's the minute attention to detail that sets the trophies on the shelf.



Willie Mullins with son Patrick at Punchestown Racecourse



Willie Mullins with Ruby Walsh at a schooling evening after racing at Leopardstown, a few days before heading to the Cheltenham Festival