

*Example 3: This feature was commissioned by Racing Post just ahead of retired trainer Toby Balding's 75th birthday*

To interview Toby Balding for the first time in 2006 was something of an education. It was memorable for many reasons; less than half his musings would have survived the red pen of a company lawyer.

He made an intriguing subject. At no stage did he speak off the record even though he well knew that to quote him on certain issues would have landed us uncompromisingly in the dock.

Nor did he ask to see the article ahead of publication. This is the bane of modern journalism: a sanitisation process that negates the point of the exercise. Yet Balding had ample reason to make the request. His imagery was so incendiary that even the printable bits provoked outrage among the affected.

To return to his lair five years later, however, was a journey laced with apprehension. It should have been a treat, of course, but times have changed. The man with the cunning of a fox had suffered a stroke in April. It was unrealistic to expect another virtuoso display from one who, even without the health intrusion, celebrates his seventy fifth birthday next week.

Thankfully, those apprehensions proved unfounded. The former trainer has rebounded in the same way his chasers would regain their form after lengthy spells in the doldrums. He has achieved something akin to full mobility, his smile remains devilish, his mind as nimble as ever. Hence the themed invitation to his party on Saturday, which is headlined: "Against The Odds".

The phrase makes an apposite metaphor for Balding's career. He started, aged 20, in 1957, when his father died young and penniless, and his younger brother, Ian, was still at school. And he closed it early last year with the sale of his Kimpton Stables – advertised at £3 million – to Ralph Beckett.

There have been countless points of punctuation in those 53 years. The highlights were two Grand Nationals, as many Champion Hurdles and a Cheltenham Gold Cup, yet Balding represents so much more than that. He is an institution of sorts; not one who should lecture aspiring trainers at a seat of learning, perhaps, but one whose reminiscences reflect an age when the sport was largely uncensored.

"I suppose the truth is that I have always been eccentric in my demands of my sport and my life," he says. "I adored training all those little old shits that tried very hard not to win for you. Racing to me is an obsession. As long as I live I will never lose interest in it."

Balding's greatest asset was his talent for infusing potential owners with his passion. Few have embraced such a broad parish: in addition to riding the late Queen Mother's Point-to-Pointers he was the first to take syndicated racehorse ownership to

the Stock Market, in the process introducing hundreds of small owners to what was then an elitist pursuit.

As he dwells on his deeds it becomes plain that Balding's memory is mercifully intact. Names of eminently forgettable horses trip off his tongue. It isn't long before the Balding of five years ago is in full flow, recalling, among other highlights, how the gamble he landed with New World in the 1959 Portland Handicap allowed him to buy the yard from his mother.

He talks matter-of-factly about his stroke; how he was celebrating his grandson's birthday at home before he woke up in a Southampton hospital with no knowledge of the intervening 36 hours.

"I guess I was out with the fairies," he reflects, five months on. "They had to re-educate one how to dress oneself; literally how to find everything you need. At first they put all your clothes out for you on the hospital bed. I can do that for myself now."

Inevitably, this permanently active individual ignored a warning sign 12 months earlier, which he attributed to a virus. But anyone who thought he would take his misfortune lying down doesn't really know him.

The only legacy of the stroke that still troubles him is blurred sight: it comes and goes. It is a considerable setback to a man who loves driving but can no longer entertain the idea. But the biggest impost is that he cannot read, and therefore, cannot keep up with the daily rhythms of a sport that has always held him in thrall.

"It is a big bore," he says. "I cannot keep abreast because of it. I have never been short of a word and I have never been short of involvement, which were the two things immediately denied to me.

"My inquisitiveness still exists but I have a job pursuing it. Even though I grab hold of people and make them tell me what is happening, I miss that involvement enormously. But even without a stroke, you start to struggle when you are 75 – unless you're Red Hollinshead, who just goes on forever. I'm sure I could still take Reg on if I could see what I was doing..."

Balding's words sound melancholy in print but he dispenses them with no hint of self-pity. He chuckles at the poor timing of taking on a puppy, a half-share in a broodmare and "a rather expensive new jumping horse" just before the stroke, yet these assets will be invaluable to his long-term recuperation.

The puppy is not the only youngster on the block, since Balding lives with his son Gerald, Gerald's wife and two noisy grandchildren. The broodmare brings different responsibilities: she is part of a tribe Balding maintains after a bequest to him from one of his most loyal owners, Bridget Swire, who died in 2009.

Swire left him 38 horses, including a half-share in Sakhee's Secret, the stallion whom Balding trained to win the July Cup in 2007. "Bridget left me an awful lot of horses and a little bit of money," he says. "In ordinary circumstances you'd be pleased, but the monthly bill for their keep swallowed up most of the money.

"Bridget's brothers, who are her executors, have been brilliant. They became so worried about my finances that they gave me her house, which is worth quite a lot. Hopefully, Sakhee's Secret will keep me solvent. If he starts off with a bang next season (with his first crop of two-year-olds) I will be sitting here rubbing my hands together."

It is extraordinary to contemplate Balding as a budding stallion master, but then, he has lived an extraordinarily diverse life. The man who enjoyed nothing more than a bowl of jellied eels in colourful company on the racecourse was supported in his early years by Jock Whitney, who was then America's Ambassador to London.

One day an affluent owner of his had his pocket picked at Newton Abbot. Balding put the word about; within the hour word reached him that the man's wallet had been placed above the cistern in the men's toilet. Its contents were untouched.

Balding takes up the story. "As we were leaving a marvellous chap called Freddie The Fly came up to me and said in his high-pitched Cockney accent: 'Very sorry Tobes, I had no idea he was one of us. Apologies all round'."

This and many other stories will do the rounds when 250 friends and family gather for Balding's birthday bash in a Hampshire hotel on Saturday evening. It should be quite a night.

The dress code – "Ascot to Newton Abbott" – says it all, just as says plenty about the man with as many friends at the latter venue as those who proposed his appointment as honorary member of the Jockey Club, not to mention the OBE he was awarded at the end of last year.

Perhaps Balding's one regret is that he was obliged to sell Kimpton Stable after his son-in-law, Jonathan Geake, drew stumps towards the end of 2009. "I retired in 2004 hoping that Jonathan would make a success of it, but for various reasons, he didn't."

The suspicion lingers that Balding would love to have started a training dynasty to match the jockeys that passed through his academy – among them Bob Champion, Peter Scudamore, Adrian Maguire and most recently, Tony McCoy. The idea appealed to his strong paternalistic streak.

Against that, there is much to be said for providence. "Happily, Jonathan has started up again at East Kennett (near Marlborough) and is having winners," Balding reflects. "The financial pressure of running a big yard made him miserable. He doesn't have that worry now."

Nor could the sale of Kimpton Stable have been more convenient: it was completed just before Balding suffered his stroke. “Thank goodness that was all settled,” he says, “and I’m extremely happy with Ralph (Beckett), with whom I have a filly in training. There’s a gallop that starts right outside my front door.”

One of Balding’s regular walks takes him up to The Clump, from where he can look down on the stable project he built from scratch in the twilight of his career. Very little escapes his eye, even if the definition is blurred. Other senses besides have taken him on the magic carpet ride from aspiring teenager to racing’s eminence grise.

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