

# Gallop to glory

From course-record breakers to champagne-fuelled revenge on doubters, John Gallagher has spent more than 40 years proving that happy horses and steady routines produce winners

WORDS: Sharon Martin PHOTOS: John Gallagher Racing

**O**n a clear Cotswold morning, when the mist drifts slowly off the fields around Chastleton and the soundtrack is limited to birdsong and the steady rhythm of hooves on turf, Grove Farm feels calm – deliberately so. There is no rush, no drama, and no sense of horses being pushed before they are ready. Instead, there is routine, familiarity and the quiet confidence of a yard that knows exactly what it is doing.

This is the home and base of racehorse trainer John Gallagher, whose career spans more than four decades and whose homegrown Cotswold operation has trained everything from sharp five-furlong sprinters to three-mile chasers, often breaking course records along the way.

‘Horses don’t like change,’ John says. ‘They absolutely



love routine. If they know what's happening every day – where they're going, who's riding them, what's expected – you take away a lot of unnecessary worry. And once their head's right, the rest usually follows.'

John's racing life began far from the manicured paddocks of the Cotswolds. Growing up in County Durham, it was Saturday afternoons spent watching racing on television that first captured his imagination.

'I used to sit there and think: "I could do that",' he says. 'So, I told the careers officer at school that I wanted to be a jockey.'

The response was not exactly encouraging.

'She put me down as a lorry driver,' he says, laughing. 'I hadn't even sat on a saddle at that point. I didn't start riding until I was 16.'

Still, when he left school in 1983, John went straight into racing.

'I didn't think for one minute I'd end up doing all that I have,' he says. 'I just wanted to work with horses. Everything else came later.'

John's early years were spent absorbing knowledge wherever he could find it. Working his way through respected yards, he became head person for trainers including Karl Burke and John Mackie, assisted Lord Tyrone, and gained experience with Peter Harris, John White and Ken Ivory.



'Horses absolutely love routine' says John Gallagher

routine, and some need to be left well alone. The trick is working out which is which.'

Exposure to different training styles was invaluable.

'Every trainer and every head lad had something different,' he says. 'And head lads often knew more. Seeing a variety of methods meant I never believed there was only one right way to train a horse.' That openness to learning took John to Australia, where he spent six months riding trackwork for Gai Waterhouse and Bart Cummings.

'Training there was very much about timing gallops, with most of the work done on the track,' he recalls. 'It honestly felt very 1920s when I was there.'

Yet the experience left a lasting mark.

'The timing aspect fascinated me,' he says. 'I brought that back and adapted it to our gallops here; different speeds on different parts of the gallop and actually riding the gallop properly rather than just using it.'

John also rode winners as an amateur, something he considers essential before becoming a trainer. 'I felt I needed to race-ride before training so I could understand what a horse actually needs to be able to win,' he says. Race-riding, he explains, sharpens perspective very

‘The biggest lessons that stayed with me were learning what to look for when buying horses,’ he says. ‘And understanding that getting a horse mentally fit is just as important as getting them physically fit.’

It is a distinction that has defined his career.

‘You can have the fittest horse in the world, but if their head’s not right, you’re wasting your time,’ he says. ‘Some horses need confidence, some need patience, some need

quickly. ‘A race is run at a much faster pace, and for much longer, than you or the horse thinks,’ he says. ‘It’s easy from the outside to underestimate that.’

That experience still informs his training today.

‘It helps you understand how small things – a bend, a camber, a downhill run – can completely change how a horse runs,’ he says. ‘Certain horses love certain tracks, and you only really learn that by feeling it.’ >

# COTSWOLD RACING



Grove Farm in Chastleton, near Moreton-in-Marsh – where the magic happens

**JOHN HAS TRAINED EVERYTHING** from sharp five-furlong sprinters to three-mile chasers, a versatility he feels should be far more common.

‘I’m of the opinion that if you can train a racehorse properly in the first place, you can train any type of racehorse over any distance they’re bred for,’ he says. ‘And quite often over distances they’re not bred for.’

That belief has been borne out repeatedly, sometimes spectacularly: ‘Peter Island was one of the most remarkable,’ John says.

‘He came back after a year off the course and won, missing a third course record by 100th of a second. At the time, he would’ve been the only horse ever to hold three course records at once.’

wanted her. ‘As a yearling, she had been dismissed entirely. ‘Her owner Deidre, was advised to give her away, or even put her down, because she didn’t look like a racehorse,’ John says. ‘Thankfully, Deidre didn’t listen.’

Instead, Hollybell came to Grove Farm, and flourished. ‘We won numerous races with her,’ he says. ‘And every time she won, Deidre would send a bottle of champagne to the person who suggested she shouldn’t keep her. That became a bit of a tradition.’

Hollybell’s legacy did not end there.

‘She went on to breed several progeny rated over 90,’ John says. ‘So, she had the last laugh... and then some.’

Today, John remains just as excited by what is coming through the yard.

‘Every time Hollybell won, Deidre would send a bottle of champagne to the person who suggested she shouldn’t keep her’

There was also Mac Gille Eoin, whose performance at Epsom remains a highlight.

‘He broke the course record over six furlongs at Epsom,’ John says. ‘That’s not an easy thing to do, and certainly not by accident.’

Perhaps most telling of all was Moon Glow.

‘Moon Glow broke the track record at Plumpton carrying 12 stone in a two-mile chase,’ John says. ‘And what always makes me smile is that he was bred for six furlongs. That sums up what can happen when you train the horse in front of you rather than what the catalogue says.’

While records bring recognition, many of John’s most cherished wins are about journeys rather than statistics.

Green Power’s victory in the Shergar Cup at Ascot remains a career highlight. ‘That was a huge moment,’ he says. ‘Ascot, the Shergar Cup – it doesn’t get much better.’

Then there was Quench Dolly, whose timing could not have been better. ‘She won on our wedding anniversary,’ John says. ‘Then she won again a week later, and then she went and won at Glorious Goodwood. That’s the sort of run you don’t script, you just enjoy it while it’s happening.’

**IF ONE HORSE DEFINES JOHN’S CAREER,** it is Hollybell.

‘Hollybell defined my career as a flat racehorse trainer,’ he says. ‘She was one of our first flat horses, and nobody

‘Sun of Dolly is one,’ he says. ‘He’s Hollybell’s grandson and was bred at home, which makes it even more special.’

Another is Kodi K.

‘Kodi K was a breeze-up purchase for £10,000,’ John says. ‘Which doesn’t buy you much these days, but he’s got plenty about him.’

John’s emphasis on individual attention extends to owners as much as horses.

‘I’ve seen horses change beyond belief with the correct individual work and attention,’ he says.

‘When you don’t have many horses, you have to get it right, there’s nowhere to hide.’

For owners, particularly those new to racing, Grove Farm offers openness and honesty.

‘Because this is our home, owners are part of it,’ he says. ‘We’re honest about the horses, and people appreciate that. Owners quickly become friends, which probably explains why most of them have been with me for 15 or 20 years.’

He sums it up simply.

‘If the horses are happy, the owners are happy,’ he says. ‘And ownership should be fun.’

Grove Farm is more than a training base.

‘It was home here in the Cotswolds before it was a training yard,’ John says.

‘So, this place means a lot.’

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**ASK JOHN ABOUT RACING** myths and he doesn't hesitate.

'Peeing on sore shins,' he says. 'Although one myth that does work is backing the first trainer you see going to the racecourse.'

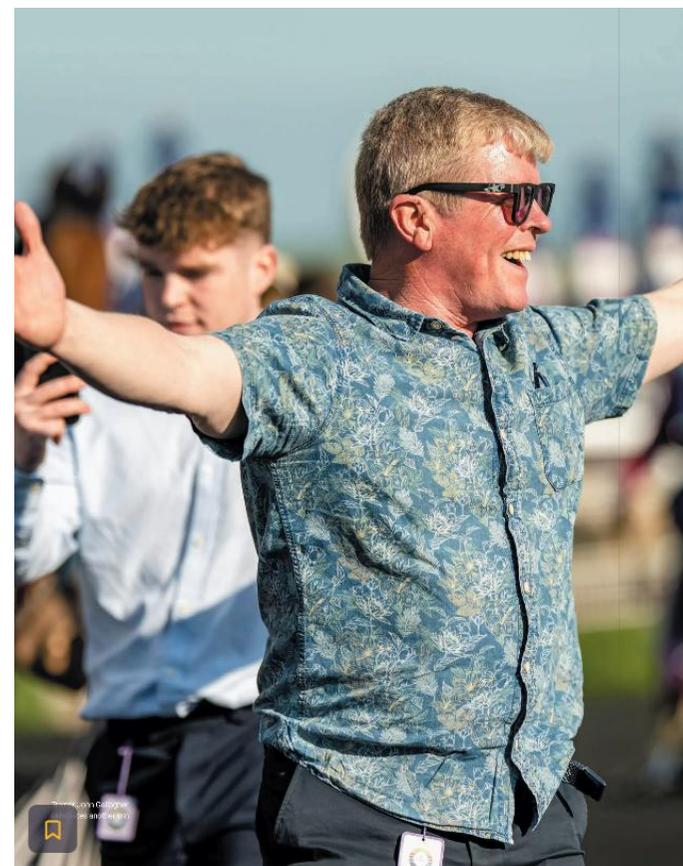
His greatest Cheltenham memory remains Desert Orchid winning the Gold Cup in the snow.

This year's tips for Cheltenham? 'The Jukebox Man for the Gold Cup,' he says.

'And Proactif in the Triumph Hurdle.'

After more than four decades in racing, John Gallagher remains quietly passionate, deeply experienced and firmly rooted in the the Cotswolds, training winners and breaking records from his homegrown yard, proving that calm, care and consistency still win races. ●

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Havana Pusey and Jayda Sicaford in the Winners Enclosure



Drish Myte and Secret Handshake on the gallops



Four Ball to bebed yer lings



Havana Pusey and Havana Motts warm up before going on the gallops