

NEWS FOCUS

Helping tackle the illness we can't see

SPECIAL REPORT



In the first of a two-part investigation into jockeys' welfare, **Lee Mottershead** finds out about mental health in the weighing room

ALL too often they are left battered, bruised and broken.

For jockeys, physical injuries are as inevitable as they are regrettable. We see it happen to them on a regular basis. What we do not see, and very seldom hear about, is any mental anguish they might suffer. But although undoubtedly special people, jockeys are not immune to mental illness. Indeed, they may even be more vulnerable. Fortunately progress is now being made, in respect of their willingness to seek help and the way in which racing is finding ways of offering it.

This was never more evident than late last summer when the Professional Jockeys Association launched a round-the-clock mental health helpline, operated in conjunction with Cognacity, the UK's leading provider of counselling to professional sports people.

The confidential service, given £25,000 of funding by Great British Racing, is there to help those suffering from depression, addiction to alcohol, drugs or gambling, grief, relationship difficulties or indeed any problem otherwise kept hidden inside.

One in four will suffer mental illness every year

The service has already been accessed on a number of occasions by PJA members. That should not come as a surprise given it is believed one in four people will suffer from a form of mental illness every year.

"Since I joined four years ago I've been very aware we needed to improve our mental health provision," says PJA chief executive Paul Struthers.

"I've struggled with depression – and would be surprised if I don't again at some point in the future – and having paid for and benefited tremendously from talking therapies, I am quite passionate about the importance of addressing issues early and being open about it to destigmatise it.

"We've always been able to refer people to Racing Welfare's addiction and recovery adviser Joe Carter, who is absolutely fantastic. Jockeys could also

access talking therapies but they had to approach us or the Injured Jockeys Fund, and that's not always easy.

"Having seen what Cognacity had done with other sports, we really wanted to offer the same service. With help from the money we got through the changes to the jockeys' championship and Stobart's sponsorship, we were able to set it up in summer last year. We're now looking at using some of our reserves and other commercial income to widen this service to retired jockeys and will be in a position to do so later this year."

Struthers adds: "We carried out a survey of our membership in the autumn and asked them a number of questions about health and wellbeing, including questions on nutrition and mental health. Less than 20 per cent said they were suffering from a mental health issue, which would roughly tally with the figures for the population, given there is general under-reporting. Forty-four per cent of those were receiving support, but 54 per cent weren't, and 25 per cent of all respondents were not aware of the helpline.

"It had just been launched, so hopefully that awareness has been improved already and we're starting to put posters up in jockeys' areas on racecourses, too.

"We know there are jockeys using the helpline and that they have benefited from the subsequent follow-up support and face-to-face talking therapies that come with it. Some I've referred, others have referred themselves and we therefore rightly don't know who they are.

"Jockeys would not hesitate to fix a physical issue. I really hope they can start seeing mental wellbeing as equally important and, crucially, perfectly normal."

Sadly all too normal for many is a life blighted by alcoholism. Following the death last year of Pat Eddery, and the subsequent comments of his daughter Natasha, the subject of alcohol dependency was given a wide public airing.

Richard Hughes, one of Eddery's successors as Britain's champion Flat jockey, has never been afraid to talk of his own battle with the bottle. In fact, at the time of the helpline's launch, Hughes



stressed he "would certainly have taken advantage" of such a service had one been available at the time of his own illness.

Such a service is not yet available for jockeys in Ireland, where culturally there has been an even greater reluctance to give public airing to personal discussions about mental health problems. Early last year Irish jump jockey Mark Enright bravely chose to smash that taboo by discussing his own depression with the Racing Post's Irish editor Jonathan Mullin. Twelve months on, he is mighty pleased he did.

'Being a jockey is so hard on the mind'

"I suppose what happened to me must have been linked to the job," says Enright.

"Being a jockey is so hard on the mind. Most of us are self-employed. You're trying to be better than the others, and trying to better yourself, all the time. Racing is so competitive here now. It's hard to get the opportunities and if those opportunities don't go to plan you get yourself down.

"For a long time I didn't accept things. I just thought I was having a bad week. But every week was a bad week. I couldn't see a reason for the way I felt but it was horrible, the worst feeling I've ever had.

'It got to the stage where I wasn't able to smile any more'

Mark Enright

It was like being in a room full of people with everyone in that room against you. You just feel so alone and the feeling gets worse and worse.

"I suppose it had been with me for a year to a year and a half, although for a good nine months of that time I couldn't understand it. I thought it was tiredness and I needed rest. But I was getting rest and it wasn't helping. I definitely hid it away.

"If you show weakness in racing you're deemed to be soft. For that reason I kept it bottled up and tried to put a smile on my face. Then it got to the stage where I wasn't able to smile any more.

"I did have a breakdown. I called into jump jockey Mark Walsh one day. To be honest, I was finished with it all. I'd had enough of everything. It had just got too hard. I didn't know where to go or what to do.

"I went to see Mark for a cup of tea and ended up bawling and crying into the cup. It had got that bad I literally just broke down into tears. I couldn't help myself."

Taking the step to see Walsh had been a major move for Enright. It proved to be thoroughly wise and, along with the support that followed a visit to Turf Club senior medical officer Dr Adrian McGoldrick, that crucial first step set him on the road to recovery.

Enright explains: "The hardest thing for me was telling someone I knew because I thought they would judge me and treat me differently. I was afraid to go to my friends for a long time. As it turned out, I wasn't judged, but it was the thing I was most afraid of happening. That's why I kept it bottled up.

"Dr McGoldrick was brilliant with me, second to none, but there is no real service in Irish racing to help. You just go to a friend or see a doctor.

"There's no telephone helpline but it

would be great if there was one that any of the jockeys could ring up and find someone on the other end who would understand. It would be well used, without a doubt."

There seems to be no immediate prospect of such a helpline getting off the ground in Ireland. Andrew Coonan, secretary to the Irish Jockeys Association, says: "For guys who run into emotional difficulty or are suffering from mental health issues like depression we don't run a confidential helpline but instead work much more on a racing family model, whereby they have access to Dr Adrian McGoldrick. He is hugely popular among the riders, which is unusual given the job he does."

At the time Enright went public with his condition, McGoldrick said: "People can have broken legs, broken arms or any type of problem and it's fine, yet there seems to be some sort of stigma attached to depression.

"It is extremely common. It is totally treatable by medication and, in Mark's case, simply by counselling."

Warren O'Connor, whose greatest moments in the saddle came aboard star mare Kooyonga, also gained from counselling after succumbing to alcoholism and an addiction to cocaine.

'People need to talk about their problems'

"No one likes to be known as an alcoholic but I know I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict," says O'Connor. "I have to admit it, and if I don't admit it to myself, I won't stay sober and clean. Thank God, I know I'm addicted.

"People need to talk about it. Since I did many people have come to me looking for help. That can only be good. It's so important to be able to help people to