

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Tom Kerr catches up with former jockey **Robert Biddlecombe**, now a saddler

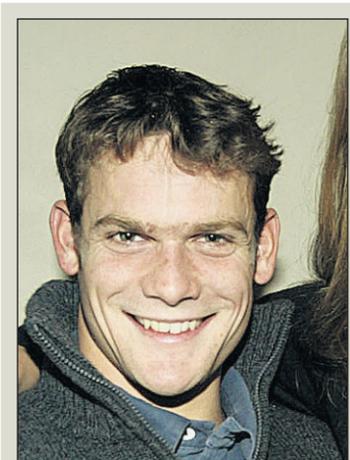
Man who quit too soon saddling up

ROBERT BIDDLECOMBE, son of three-time champion jockey Terry, appeared destined to follow in the footsteps of his father after he made a bright start to his riding career during the early 2000s.

However, at the age of just 22, after five seasons in which he rode 32 winners, he called time on race riding. As with so many young men, Biddlecombe agonised over his prospects for the future and, fearing he would find himself in his mid-30s without vocational skills or a nest egg, opted to retrain as a saddler with the assistance of the Jockeys' Employment Training Scheme (Jets). Eight years on he still wonders if he made the right decision.

"I have very fond memories but a lot of frustration that I stopped. Sometimes I think I should never have stopped – I wish I hadn't," he says.

"But I wasn't getting enough rides to make enough money so that by the time I got to retirement age I'd have enough to retire. I'd have had a moderate salary each year and by the time I got to 35 would have to retire and find myself a new career."



Name Robert Biddlecombe

Age 30

When at large 2000 to early 2005, riding 32 winners

Biggest moments Winning at Cheltenham and the Highland National at Perth

Biddlecombe, who was based with Nigel Twiston-Davies, rarely goes racing any more, the sights and sounds of the racecourse too tough a reminder of what he gave up. But he has fond memories of a spell in the saddle that included a Highland National win at Perth and a victory at the spiritual home of jump racing.

"One horse in particular stands out for me, Rockcliffe Gossip. I won the Highland National on him and I

finished second on him at Cheltenham. I also had a good win at Wetherby on Mistanoora and he gave me a win at Cheltenham as well," recalls Biddlecombe.

After quitting the saddle Biddlecombe, searching for something to replace the buzz of race riding, turned to triathlons – a discipline in which he has achieved some success.

"I knew I could run a bit, should be able to cycle a bit, and would be able to teach myself to swim, so I started doing triathlons," he says.

"I did that for two or three years and competed in European championships in Ireland and Portugal, and in world championships in Budapest. I was seventh in the Europeans in Portugal and 17th in the world championships."

Sadly, Biddlecombe had to surrender a second promising sporting career after he twice broke his knee cap.

However, he has now turned his attentions towards succeeding as a self-made businessman. He plans to open a saddlery at Norton, between Gloucester and Tewkesbury, this summer, subject to securing loans and stock.

And, having quit the saddle once, he also hopes to make a return in the coming years. "I might get my amateur status back in a couple of seasons and have a go at that, just as a bit of a hobby," he says.



Reve De Sivola: revels in heavy ground, as when winning the Long Walk

CHELTENHAM FOCUS

Lee Mottershead assesses the prospects of World Hurdle hope **Reve De Sivola**, who's been a revelation this season

THERE will be no Big Buck's on show when the field for the 2013 Ladbrokes World Hurdle faces the starter, but one of its leading contenders, Reve De Sivola, is among a number of fancies who boast a story very similar to the race's most prolific winner.

The final-fence exit of Big Buck's in the 2008 Hennessy Gold Cup resulted in a high-class chaser being reinvented into an outstanding hurdler. While few transformations have ever been as successful, Reve De Sivola showed at Ascot last month that Big Buck's is not the only example of a failed chaser finding a bright new life back over hurdles.

Towards the head of the World Hurdle ante-post market sit the likes of Tidal Bay, Peddlers Cross and Grands Crus, all of them campaigned most recently over fences. However, not one member of that trio has as yet been confirmed an intended runner in the festival's Thursday highlight, for which Reve De Sivola is very much bound following his wide-margin romp in the Long Walk Hurdle.

Twelve months earlier on the same Ascot card, the Nick Williams-trained French import had what turned out to be his final run as a chaser. His third to The Minack was hardly a disgrace, but it represented his eighth consecutive defeat over fences.

A tendon injury forced an early halt to Reve De Sivola's 2011-12 campaign, and with that injury and his disappointing record in mind, the son of Assessor returned over hurdles against Big Buck's at Newbury in December, producing a fine performance to finish a nine-length second. Connections immediately

Revving up for vacancy at the top table

Horse Reve De Sivola **Age** 8
Trainer Nick Williams
Festival target Ladbrokes World Hurdle
Form 4752-21
Racing Post Rating 162h
Festival odds 8-1

declared their intentions were to once again take on the champion at Ascot, but at the start of Long Walk week Big Buck's was ruled out for the season.

All of a sudden there was room at the top of the staying hurdlers' tree. With an excellent all-the-way 14-length win in the Long Walk, Reve De Sivola became the one to take that position.

There will be one more pre-festival outing for the eight-year-old with the World's course and distance to be tested on Saturday in the Cleeve Hurdle. Reve De Sivola is clearly well suited by heavy ground and the one area of concern would be connections' warning about the possibility of him not running if the ground was good or quicker. Nevertheless, a similar display to the one he put up at Ascot would surely make him the one most likely to dethrone the horse whose path Reve De Sivola has so successfully trod.

I GOTTA HORSE

Steve Dennis meets **Jim Kilduff** who is overcoming life's heartaches with Wild Ground

Champions at last as the dream unfolds

Horse Wild Ground **Career wins** 6

Owners Jim Kilduff & Ken Jones

Best day When the dream came true at Fontwell

ONCE upon a time there was a horse called Aldaniti and a man named Bob Champion. You know all about them. Now there's a horse named Wild Ground and a man called Jim Kilduff, and although we aren't dealing in Grand Nationals the stories aren't so very far apart.

Wild Ground is a 12-year-old mare with a history of misfortune. "She's had a sinus operation, she struck into herself, then she had heat in one of her good legs, and to top it all she picked up a hairline fracture in her pelvis," says Kilduff.

Kilduff, 60, has Parkinson's disease, but he doesn't let it affect him, and it had been his dream to own a racehorse since the age of eight when visits to the local clinic due to his asthma led to his initiation into the sport.

"My Dad used to take me to the clinic and on the way back we'd stop at the pub," he says. "I remember all the talk about horses – when I looked at their names in the paper it helped me relax, eased my asthma."

Kilduff liked a bet, liked sitting



Wild Ground has been a revelation for her connections this season

with his grandfather in the shed and listening to the results on the radio in the evening. He had a penchant for tricasts, remembers well getting the 1-2-3 in the 1981 Grand National when Aldaniti led them home. And he still had the dream of owning a horse.

"The chance came with Wild Ground," he says. "I went to Kevin Bishop because he was local and they're nice people, straightforward."

"I bought the mare and had money for training fees, went halves with my son Dan. He dropped out after a while and my friend Ken Jones took his share."

Later, though, frustrated by Wild Ground's problems, Kilduff thought about cutting his losses. "All I'd done was pay out," he says. "But Kevin told me he'd get her right and would train her for free until she won a race."

Wild Ground returned from almost two years off, was pulled up at Taunton and then went to Fontwell

last month for a long-distance chase. She won by 45 lengths.

"I didn't go," chuckles Kilduff. "I wasn't feeling great that day so I watched in the bookies, and when she crossed the line my jaw hit the floor."

"It had been a miserable couple of years, what with my condition and the fact that my brother Tony and my brother-in-law Barry had both died."

"It was Barry who told me not to give up, that the mare would win a race one day. That day in the bookies it was like he was staring down through the clouds at me."

Wild Ground – who while she was on the easy list foaled a colt by Helissio, now three years old and waiting for Kilduff to give him a good name – won again at Fontwell later that month. It'll all be in Kilduff's book one day; it'll be some read.

"It's been my dream come true," he says. "Sometimes they do, don't they?"

Q&A with owner Paul Duffy 'He's a relentless galloper'

How hard was the decision to revert to hurdles? Not hard at all. On reflection he didn't really take to fences. We had been discussing it even before he had the tendon injury.

Is it important that he gets heavy ground, as when winning at Ascot? He's a relentless galloper who is suited by those conditions, whereas other horses can be greatly inconvenienced by them. Good to soft would not be a worry, but given his tendon injury we would need to have a debate about good ground. On anything quicker than good he certainly wouldn't run.

How strong are his festival claims? It's very unfortunate that Big Buck's is injured. We would have been happy to take him on and finish second. None of the horses at the head of the market stand out, so we're optimistic.