

Confidence key in rise of Malone

Daragh Ó Conchúir talks to bloodstock agent Tom Malone about his successful transition to the sales ring

TOM MALONE recalls approaching the figurative crossroads, distraught and broken. He had turned back from conditional to amateur to work with Philip Hobbs and booted home three winners in his first five rides.

But then he broke his shoulder schooling, and two weeks after returning, fractured his ankle. Hobbs was willing to keep him on but he had fallen down the pecking order.

"I packed up the Fiesta and I headed for home," Malone details. "I was going home after one year in England, a failure, and it was going to be seen as a failure and I wasn't in a good place. I'll never, ever forget it."

"I pulled up in Fishguard and I cried my eyes out. I cried for an hour long. I thought 'Fuck this. I deserve one more chance at this.' I got the *Horses In Training* book out of me bag and opened it up on Martin Pipe's page. I rang him and said 'Mr Pipe, would you mind if I came and had a job?'"

"I'll give you a job but you're never gonna ride," he said.

"I just wanted another year. Within three weeks I'd ridden for him and I never looked back. That was the phone call that changed my life."

He was 21 then and had it gone another way, he would have been back home, a bricklayer like his father Tom Snr or carpenter like his brother. And that would have been fine except that Malone had grown to love horses.

This was despite the Tullamore youngster only having had his introduction to them seven years earlier, as two friends brought him to Brosna View Stables in Clara for a riding lesson on his 14th birthday. He was reluctant but it was a Saturday and there was nothing much else to do. Within moments, he was hooked.

After four lessons, he was working at Brosna View on weekends and quickly hacking and hunting as well under the eagle eye of Brian Sheridan, a show jumping guru who also had a long association with the South Westmeath Harriers.

"I'll never forget those days," says Malone. "He made me a man."

In time he moved on to Tom Lacy, John Quinn and Philip Rothwell, for whom he rode a winner. He went greyhound racing in Navan one night and met ex-jockey Ronnie Beggan, a multiple Cheltenham Festival-winning jockey.

"He said 'if you're gonna shovel shit, shovel it for the best. If you're gonna ride, ride for the best' and that stuck with me. He told me 'you need to go to England.' So I did."

His decade at Nicholashayne provided exposure to genius but also preparation and attention to detail. Allied with a work ethic most inherited from Tom Snr, these traits are the foundation of his flourishing bloodstock business.

As "an average jockey", albeit one that could get the job done with more than 70 winners including a season-high 30 in 2004-2005, Malone was always considering the possibilities of life out

Tom Malone busy at the Tattersalls Derby Sale earlier this year



of the saddle. So he commentated on point-to-points in England and did some punditry work for At The Races. When he bought his first horse and it went on to win nine races, he had found his vocation.

"I never missed a beat. I worked so hard and just built up the momentum. Always being seen at the sales, going that bit extra and it started to work. I ended up getting into Paul Nicholls and buying a few for him and that now is one of the main guys I buy horses for."

The client list is broad and it is no wonder given the stunning CV that details 45 graded successes, 11 of them Grade 1s, another a Grand National. The success is not confined to National Hunt either, as he has accumulated nine group races on the flat, including a Group 1.

Dodging Bullets, One For Arthur, My Dream Boat, Finian's Oscar, Native River, Irving, Brindisi Breeze, The Worlds End and Caspar Netscher are among the most prominent of his triumphs.

The Somerset resident spoke to *The Irish Field* ahead of the Tattersalls Ireland Cheltenham November Sale in Cheltenham yesterday, where he was sure to be very active.

What do you have to do to prepare for this sale?

I do like to have seen these horses as youngsters in all the yards, so I already have a vibe on which horses they think is the nicest. I already have pictures and footage of them. So when it happens on a Sunday, at least I know it's not after-timing. Horses win on a Sunday and I know that they are strongly fancied, that it's going to happen. That always gives me a lot of confidence, these horses aren't overnight successes. They're in the background doing the right things. They're always the best horses to buy.

What determines who you go to?

It's not a case of that. I get the catalogue. I go through it in depth. I will do up a profile on the whole sale, I will put it under my header and I'll send it around to all my owners. I'll have a fair idea who wants what. If two people want the same one, it's very simple. You say 'You're gonna be fighting with x, y and z on that and it's up to you what you

wanna spend on it.' That's how we do it.

What is it like forking out huge sums of other people's money on a horse?

First and foremost is confidence... confidence that you've picked the right horse. I put my balls on the line at Cheltenham last (March) to buy a horse called Slate House. I bought him myself. I paid £260,000 for him. I stood in the ring, no-one really said 'Go and buy it for me' but I wanted that horse. No-one else was going to have him on their books because I needed to have that horse. Now I knew, give me 24 hours, I'll get him sold if I've bought him. He was sold 15 minutes after I'd bought him. If I'd left him there, I wouldn't have him on my books. I wouldn't have earned a commission on him. The whole thing wouldn't have been in my favour and I'd have to watch that horse running this year for somebody else. That would have killed me and would make me think about not wanting to do this job. Because if I don't put my neck on the line and buy him, why should an owner? He won at Cheltenham first-time out. That is where the confidence comes from.

It would be unusual for an agent to take the plunge without an order?

Very unusual. No-one else would take that gamble and they're probably right. It's a suicidal gamble sometimes but I couldn't do it any other way. I'm not functioning to do it any other way. I'm not the sort of guy that goes to a sale and if he doesn't buy something, he doesn't. I know every time I go to a sale there's a chance there's a good horse there. But pick him, and then sell him. Many's the time I've bought horses and I haven't found owners for them, but because I know about them, I can sell them. They invariably get sold. The odd time I have got it wrong and it's cost me money but that's life. That's the rough and tumble of trying to make a business. Through that, I've managed to build up a reputation and now I have orders.

And no doubt you are building contacts all the time?

I've got to a stage where now they want to advise me on the right ones because it's in their interests to make sure that I

am, especially on the Irish side of it. On the French side, I have Seamus Murphy who helps me there. I have a guy called Bernard Cullinane, who's from Dunganarvan and is a very good guy on speed figures. His judgement on some of these horses is invaluable. It just puts a little more flesh on the bone. I make my own mind up on the horses but having someone to say, apart from visually it's very fast, factually it's very fast is a big thing so Bernard has brought a new angle to it. And Nick Taylor is my assistant.

It's a very public confirmation or otherwise of your judgement when they run.

The first day they run is the hardest because I have told an owner to buy this horse. I've been in the position where they don't win and they don't for a year. I bought Double Treasure unraced out of Ireland and he was a disaster for 18 months. Now he's after winning his last four, he won at Cheltenham last time out and is rated 150. But for 18 months he was a giveaway job and me with the egg on my face. But I knew the ability was there. I had to take some decent cuts at me over him but I don't care. As long as they don't get hurt they can prove me right.

What big wins did you enjoy most?

Cheltenham in 2015 was a big year because one of them was French (Qualando), one of them was a point-to-pointer (Next Sensation) and one of them was a flat horse (Dodging Bullets), so no-one can pigeonhole me to "he only buys pointers" or "he only buys French horses." Last April at Aintree I had two Grade 1 winners (Finian's Oscar and The Worlds End), a Grade 2 winner (Lalor) and a Grand National winner (One For Arthur). What a fabulous week that was!

That was for four different trainers. Everybody gets a chance with me. I buy a horse and whoever says they want it first gets it, whether it's Paul Nicholls or Richard Woollacott. There's no favouritism. That's not how I run my business and they all know that. That's why they all use me because they know they'll get a fair crack of the whip. I don't care who it is, I want to buy winners and I want to share them with everyone.



Confidence is everything. If I don't put my neck on the line to buy a horse, why should an owner?