

THORNTON



BEST OF BRITISH

Fresh from his triumphs at The Festival, Robert Thornton is now firmly established as one of the best jockeys in the business. The man known as 'Chocolate' talks to John Cobb about his mentors, his hopes for this season and why he kept quiet after a big win at Cheltenham...

ROBERT 'Chocolate' Thornton became a hero at this year's Cheltenham Festival.

Not only was he the top British-born jockey at the meeting for the second successive year, not only did he interrupt the Irish rampage through the meeting, but he outrode a Classic-winning Flat jockey to win one of the meeting's major prizes. Yet what earned him even greater esteem was his refusal to speak to the microphone thrust into his face before he had revealed his thoughts on the race to owner and trainer.

No disrespect was intended by Thornton; his silence was due to the jockey's desire to show the utmost respect for his employers.

'The owners pay the bills, they should be the first to hear what you have to say,' he explains. 'And I'd rather gather my thoughts, think about it a bit. Anything worth saying can wait ten minutes.'

Thornton's deferential opinion provoked some television viewers into a response. Several of them wrote to the Racing Post about the incident, and all with gratitude to Thornton for sparing them yet another breathless, snot-strewn, 'he jumped grand'.

In any case it is a stance the 28-year-old

Thornton is not likely to alter. It reflects the old-fashioned good manners instilled in him by his mentor, the late David Nicholson.

With the Duke's passing this summer, another cornerstone of an age of rigid standards may have been chipped away, but his legacy lives on in the many, who like Thornton, graduated from Nicholson's academy over the years.

'There's no way I'd be where I am today

"I RECKON THAT MY WAY DE SOLZEN IS A POTENTIAL GOLD CUP WINNER IN TWO OR THREE YEARS."

without him,' Thornton concedes. 'The Duke would tell you what you did wrong, but he'd never do it in public. The opposite, in fact, he'd back you one hundred per cent if anyone else was critical.'

Thornton, whose father was a professional huntsman, was raised in a world of horses and, though never pressed into riding by his parents, sought no other career from the time

he first threw his leg over a horse at the age of eight.

'I'd go down to the Duke's during school holidays at Christmas and summer. I went to college but it didn't agree with me, and my mother said I could only leave if I had a job to go to. The Duke gave me that job.'

It was while with Nicholson that the boy christened Robert Thornton evolved into the young man Chocolate Thornton, champion amateur jockey and top conditional rider.

The fact that there is a firm of confectioners sharing his surname is purely coincidental; Chocolate earned his sobriquet in the yard because that was all he ate. He can still ride at 10st, but it's best not to try this dietary method at home in an attempt to achieve similar results.

The stable jockey at Jackdaws Castle was Adrian Maguire and there is something endearing about the way that Thornton, despite all his subsequent success, holds the Irishman in awe. 'He was a God. My knees would be shaking just riding work against him,' Thornton says. 'But he was so good to all us claimers that we'd never be afraid to ask him a question.'

Thornton's self belief in his abilities now is such that he can be similarly honest in his regard for the champion of his generation, Tony McCoy. 'You'd be scared of AP in a race,' Thornton admits. 'He's phenomenal, just phenomenal.'

There was also a charming lack of ego in him seeking the autograph of Johnny Murtagh, Derby winner on Sinndar, High Chaparral and Motivator – but deprived so memorably by Thornton in his ambition to claim a Festival success when My Way De Solzen beat Golden Cross in this year's Ladbrokes World Hurdle.

Murtagh was visibly shaken by the defeat, saying: 'I'm sick. I've not felt as sick in a long time.' His thoughts when Thornton brought some pictures of the race to Royal Ascot for him to sign can only be assumed, though he politely obliged his rival, from whom no triumphalism had been intended.

Thornton himself has the respect of his peers in the jumping ranks. Richard Johnson, long a friend as well as rival, says: 'When we started with the Duke he always showed a lot of talent. We were both lucky to have ridden a lot as kids, with his dad being a huntsman, so we had a head start and it definitely shows in his riding, not just on the course, but when he's schooling.'

'He rides a good bit shorter than I do and with his foot just half way in the iron, but he can do it because his balance is so good. He's never a hindrance to a horse like some riders. There isn't a trainer in the country who wouldn't put him up.'

As a frequent travelling companion on the motorways of Britain, Johnson is well placed to see what is at the centre of Chocolate's

coating and there are no bitter surprises.

'He's OK taking stick when things go wrong, never gets too moody and he could sleep for England,' says Johnson. 'The only thing he doesn't want to do is get his hair cut. It must go back to our days with the Duke when we had to keep it trim. We're all going to chip in and buy him a haircut soon.'

Thornton also forged a life-changing alliance from those days with Nicholson's assistant, Alan King, with whom he is entering a fifth season as stable jockey at Barbury Castle, and who is the trainer of his two Festival winners this year, Voy Por Ustedes and My Way De Solzen.

'I'd have to put him up there alongside the Duke,' Thornton says. 'I wouldn't be where I am without him. He's one hundred per cent

behind you and it's good fun at the minute.'

'Nigel Bunter, the owner of the yard, is a superstar and I'd rather work with him and Alan King and know they have confidence in me than have a £100,000 retainer with someone else.'

'With 600 to 700 rides a year you're going to make a balls of it at some point. When I've properly had my lip down after a bad week, Alan just says to come and see him for a drink and tells me not to be so hard on myself.'

'In a race, he keeps the tactics simple so you're never confused about where you want to be, which is just behind the leaders, on the inside if possible, then to go upsides two out and press on.'

King is mutually appreciative of the way Thornton carries out those instructions.

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VOY OH BOY: Thornton after winning the Irish Independent Arkle on Voy Por Ustedes





'Chocolate is invariably at the right place at the right time,' he says. 'He's very good over an obstacle and very strong in a finish but never abuses a horse and that's important in a stable jockey. He's very helpful to the lads in the yard; we've got some young jockeys coming through and he's always helping them with advice.'

Thornton also recognises that without King's exceptional skills in getting the best from Voy Por Ustedes there would have been no chance of their scintillating victory in the Irish Independent Arkle Trophy on The Festival's opening day. 'He's a pretty highly strung horse, so a lot of credit has got to go to Alan.'

'Horses usually progress from the Arkle, so we hope Voy Por Ustedes can mix it with the best and be one of the best. My Way De Solzen is a potential Gold Cup winner in two or three years.'

Returning to the winner's enclosure on My Way De Solzen, Thornton was handed a mini flag of St George to wave as a small response to the gigantic Irish tricolour that had hitherto held sway. In deference to King's Scottish roots, Thornton admits it should have been the Union flag – but he is more concerned with less ephemeral recognition for the trainer, who has been picked out by Paul Nicholls as a likely challenger for his championship crown.

'I'd love to help him get there,' Thornton says. 'Alan's certainly closer to becoming a champion than me. I just want more winners and when I stop wanting that I might as well give up.'

There are already plenty of victories on the board from summer jumping this season, helped by Thornton's reluctance to stray too far. 'I had four days in Cyprus, but I'm not too keen on travelling,' he says. 'And I went up to Blackpool for the World Matchplay darts.' Thornton's grand tour then took him on to Bolton, where one of his heroes, Ricky Hatton, was carrying out a betting shop opening. 'He autographed a poster for me and I got to shake his hand.'

'I started following him from watching the Friday night fight while staying in to prepare for Saturday's big races. I've done a bit of boxing as part of training, but I wouldn't want to be a fighter.'

As you would expect from a jump jockey, it's not the fear of getting hurt that would stop Thornton from stepping into the ring, but the lack of desire to hurt others.

How that works when he plays for the Southern Jockeys football team against their northern counterparts, however, is unclear. More certain, as his similarly dependable role for the pub team at the Plough Inn at Ford would suggest, is that, like Nicholson, Thornton has no intention of straying far from the racecourse at which he has achieved so much success. A resident of Moreton-in-Marsh, judge of a class at the Moreton



Agricultural show and sponsored by the locally based Hayman-Joyce estate agents, he is now looking for a property move. While one of a dozen villages will do for his new location, the stipulation is that it must be in the Cotswolds.

Continuing his quest for perfection – and a noble attempt to avoid the embarrassing misuse of turf terminology that disfigures some works of fiction – Thornton has been assisting the novelist Lyndon Stacey with her research for an upcoming book set in the world of National Hunt racing.

He also has an impressive website, chocthornton.com, which is better presented and more up-to-date than many of the lame attempts gathering dust on the web. He plans to upload a weekly diary on the site himself, which is sure to increase the stream of emails he already receives from followers – many of them female – who send him a raft of messages each week. With his flowing blond locks he does have the look of a romantic knight and, after all, what woman can ever resist Chocolate?

More importantly, the young rider dispatched on the right path by the Duke and King and waving the flag of St George has conquests to make on the turf. And, when he does, it will be his impressive achievements that do the talking.

John Cobb is racing editor for The Independent

VITAL STATISTICS

8 His total Festival winners to date

1995 The year he joined David Nicholson as an amateur rider and rode his first winner under rules, which just happened to be at Cheltenham

The most winners Choc has ridden in a season, back in 2004/5 **97**

1997 The year of his first two Festival successes while still an amateur rider. The victories came on King Lucifer (Fulke Walwyn Kim Muir Challenge Cup Chase) and Pharanear (Perpetual Final)

6 His highest placing in the jockey's championship – achieved in both 2003/4 and 2004/5

Thornton rode a treble at the 2005 Festival with wins on Kelami (William Hill Trophy), Moulin Riche (Brit Insurance Novices Hurdle) and Penzance (JCB Triumph Hurdle)

2002 The last time Choc rode a winner at The Open. It came on Famfoni in the Sporting Index Cross Country Chase