

Horse Racing: HOT CHOC

The big interview Robert Thornton

From self-confessed ‘snotty-nosed kid’ to one of the best big-race riders around, it’s been quite a ten-year journey for Robert Thornton – and it’s one that has put his relationship with Alan King to the test on occasions, as he explains to Peter Thomas

Published: 07 December 2007 (Sport) Peter Thomas

It's not hard to imagine that, when he was a spotty young conditional jockey, there were people queuing up to give Robert Thornton a good slap. Cocky teenagers are bad enough at the best of times, but cocky teenagers who look 12 years old and have already ridden winners at Cheltenham, Aintree and Punchestown are widely considered fair game for acts of random violence.

Thornton was just 18 and still an amateur when, in the spring of 1997, he launched a brash, hormonal assault on the game's showcase meetings that began with a double on the first day at Prestbury Park for his guv'nor, David Nicholson, and ended with the pint-sized boy acquiring a man-sized tip for himself.

In one sense, Pharaneer and King Lucifer were the making of the fearless son of a huntsman. Victories in the Gold Card Final and the Kim Muir earned him a reputation for big-race aptitude that he has never lost, and he moved swiftly on to a season that yielded 71 winners and a conditionals' title. In another sense, they were far too much, too young.

These days, Thornton is many people's idea of the complete package: a gifted rider, well balanced in every sense, well adjusted and well turned out in his sponsored tailoring. At 29, he still looks only 16, but in every other respect he has grown up. Many people who knew him then, however, might find it hard to recognise him now, among them the man who has become his chief employer and equal partner in one of the game's most prolific big-race combinations.

Alan King was assistant trainer to Nicholson when the young rider first made a name for himself, and it is with lingering embarrassment that Thornton imagines what his present boss must have made of him in those far-off, formative years.

“I probably got a bit too big for my boots,” he confesses, “and with me being a bit of a snotty-nosed kid, we probably didn’t get on that great. I don’t suppose he thought much of me.

“You see it all the time with amateurs and conditionals, you do quite well and get a bit cocky, start thinking you can walk on water. You think it’s easy and you take it all a little bit for granted, stop putting in the effort you should. The only person I had telling me how I should have been behaving was the Duke, but I was too pig-headed to listen.

“That early success wasn’t the worst thing that ever happened to me and I’d never want to lose it, but I could have handled the whole thing a lot better. If I could go back and do it all again, I’d appreciate everything that came my way.”

It may have been only Thornton himself who was surprised when the first blaze of glory fizzled out. He lost his claim and suddenly found himself milling around with mere mortals in the area reserved for also-rans. The 71 winners in a season dropped off to a humble 23, and the lifeline thrown to him by veteran trainer Geoff Hubbard frayed irreparably when the talented chaser Strong Promise fell and died at Aintree in the spring of 2000.

'Choc', nicknamed after the confectionary company, wasn't in meltdown, but he wasn't flavour of the month anymore and it was with gratitude that he took up an offer to join forces with Kim Bailey. Meanwhile, lurking around the corner was another potential suitor, who fortunately had either a forgiving streak or a selective memory.

"Luckily, although Alan may not have been my biggest fan," says Thornton, "he quite liked the way I rode, and he asked me how I'd feel about coming to work for him. I thought nothing would come of it, but the next day he called and invited me over for breakfast and the deal was done."

By all accounts, strong words were exchanged in the early days of the relationship and diplomacy was only resorted to when more rudimentary methods had failed. But the pair thrived together, and Thornton made sure there would be no repeat of the slapdash days of his feckless youth.

"I learnt my lesson," he says, "and luckily I was in the right place at the right time most of the time. There was a bit of a lull, but there was always an income, always 30 or 40 horses I knew I was going to ride."

"Chris Kinane was brilliant to me at Mr Hubbard's and he let it be known in no uncertain terms that I rode Strong Promise whatever happened. Him finishing third in the Gold Cup kept me in the limelight just when I needed it. I had a funny five minutes when he died, but Chris wouldn't let me blame myself and I've been brought up to get on with things, so that's what I did. Two weeks later, I got offered the job with Kim, and the last few years with Alan have been amazing."

"I've been lucky. I have to look after my weight but it's not a desperate issue and I think I'm blessed. I can still go out and have a pint every now and then. You have to live, enjoy yourself, relax a little at some stage. You see some lads who get so involved in racing, to the exclusion of everything else, and you wonder if one day they'll wake up and wonder where their lives went."

It hasn't been all work and no play, clearly, but the rewards for Thornton's character reformation were not long in coming. The festival gods, who had frowned on him for many seasons after his abuse of their earlier gifts, relented at last. He was leading English jockey in 2005 and 2006, then banged in four winners last season to claim the all-comers' award, three of them supplied by King.

The victories of My Way De Solzen, Voy Por Ustedes and Katchit were proof, if any more were needed, that Thornton was now a team player, the finished article both in style and substance, having learned to make full use of the raw materials that had been available to him since, at the age of eight, he had been put up on a pony and packed off with the hounds.

His father was a professional huntsman, first with the Zetland, then with the Belvoir and the Bicester, and young Choc was quickly toughened up over the fields and fences of Leicestershire, but even as an eight-year-old he was a comparatively late starter.

Robert remembers: "I had to beg for a pony because my parents wouldn't let me ride until I really wanted to. They'd put my older brother on ponies as soon as he could walk and it frightened him, he'd end up crying. He'd be the first to admit he'd be a bit big to be riding racehorses anyway, at 15 or 16 stone, but my parents weren't going to make that mistake with me."

"Once I'd started, though, every Saturday you'd go hunting, twice a week at Christmas and holidays. I'd be there all day, whatever the weather, but from a very young age Dad always put me off the idea of going into hunt service, because he thought there wasn't much future in it – and in the present climate it looks as though he was right."

"I was always more interested in the horses, anyway. For as long as I could remember, I'd wanted to be a jockey, so when I outgrew the ponies, they bought some point-to-point horses to give me some experience before I went down to the Duke's."

"I still try to hunt a couple of times a year, usually on Christmas Eve, but it's hard to find the time and it would be even harder to go to Alan and tell him I'd broken my collarbone out hunting, with one or other big race just round the corner."

Thornton may recently have been asked to prove his age when trying to buy ciggies at the local shop in Moreton-in-Marsh, but there's no doubting his maturity these days, helped along by his engagement to girlfriend Meally Greenwood. He had tucked into his second helping of success with far more relish than his first, and the hook-up with King has clearly been the making of him. The Voy Por Ustedes team approach tomorrow's Tingle Creek Chase with both the strength of young shoulders and the assurance of old heads (the jockey's head, incidentally, is now blond again, having recovered from this year's charity shave).

"We might be two completely different people," says Thornton, "but there seems to be an understanding. I've never, ever felt that he's anything less than 100 per cent behind me. I got off one at Wincanton the other day and said 'Sorry, Alan', and he swore at me and said 'See you in the morning'. That was it, nothing else. He's pretty laid back these days. At the start of every day, you always know where you stand with him. There's no need for any guessing."

There's one more person, other than his guv'nor and loyal punters, who has benefitted from the fully-fledged, adult Choc, and that's his dear old mum, who these days gets a bit of a lie-in since she was taken off alarm-clock duty.

Thornton explains: "I used to have an awful time getting up in the morning and it's only just recently that my mother's stopped ringing me first thing. I used to have a bit of a problem with it at the Duke's and since then, if it was an important morning and I had to be up at five to get to Alan's, I'd get mother to ring me, and then it got to being a habit and she had to ring me."

"I've just moved house, though, and poor mother's had to have both hips replaced, so I left her alone for a while and I've been getting up okay on my own."

It must be so nice to see your kids stand on their own two feet, even if it does take 29 years and a pair of artificial hips to make it happen.

Chocthornton.com – Learn more about one of the stars of the jumps weighing room.