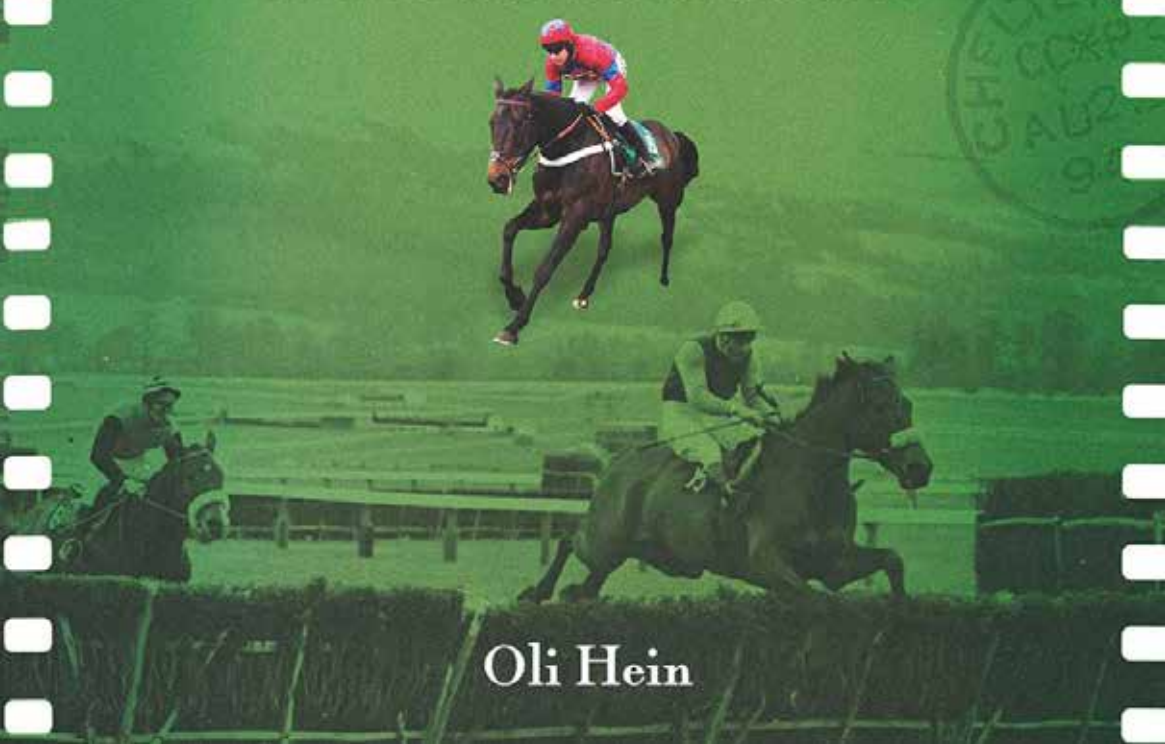




IMMORTALS

The Stories Behind
50 Great National Hunt Horses



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ALTIOR

WINNING A race is all well and good, but try winning a ‘big’ race with your horse. Now try winning another. And another. It’s the challenge that every ambitious trainer, owner and jockey faces on a regular basis. And the stats show that it’s hard; *really* hard. So, when a horse wins 19 jumps races in a row, over half of which are Grade 1, it’s impossible to see that winning machine as anything other than extraordinary, no matter how uncharitable you’re feeling. Yet Altior did this, and with him coming so soon after Sprinter Sacre had demolished his rivals in the same two-mile chaser category, Nicky Henderson, who trained both, must have felt for a while as though every day was Christmas Day.

Many top jumps horses have forgettable or unfashionable pedigrees compared to their flat counterparts. Not so Altior. As the son of Epsom Derby and Breeders Cup winner High Chaparral, out of decent jumps mare Monte Solaro, he was always going to have speed on his side. Bred in Ireland by Paddy Behan, he was given the Latin name Altior, meaning ‘Higher’; someone somewhere, one senses, was armed with precognition that this unassuming gelding would achieve something special. As a 3yo in June 2013, he was sent to the Goffs Sales where Patricia Pugh stumped up a hefty €60,000 to procure him. As this was the era that saw the pomp of the mighty Sprinter Sacre, Pugh – who only owned one other horse – sent Altior to the same trainer, Nicky Henderson, hoping optimistically that lightning would strike twice. Incredibly, it did.

By the following May, Altior was ready to run in bumpers and starting at odds of 4-6 in his very first race at Market Rasen suggested that he had displayed considerable promise on the gallops. The race began as an absolute farce, as none of the seven runners had any intention of leading and they ran one of the slowest furlongs in the history of jump racing. It didn't hinder the favourite though as he bulldozed through to win in eye-catching style by 14 lengths. He was then caught up with niggles and squirrelled away until the following spring when, in two more bumpers, he finished third, just behind future Champion Hurdler Buveur d'Air, at Newbury and then sixth at the Punchestown festival. Astonishingly, it would be the last time that he would be defeated for four-and-a-half years.

The 2015/16 season was earmarked as Altior's novice hurdling year. Indeed, he would only run five times over the smaller obstacles, although after his first performance – a 34-length annihilation of a decent ten-strong field at Chepstow – certain mouths were already salivating at what he could achieve longer-term. He followed up with cosy victories at Ascot and Cheltenham before stretching his legs to a 13-length win on Boxing Day 2015 at Kempton. He was therefore pointed inevitably at the Supreme Novices' Hurdle at the Cheltenham Festival in March 2016, but faced a top Irish rival in Min, the favourite and future multiple Grade 1 winner, as well as stablemate Buveur d'Air. Creeping through the field, Altior displayed that day one of the two trademarks that would stick with him throughout, which was to make his move between the final two obstacles and deliver a killer turn of foot that others couldn't compete with.

In winning by seven lengths, he had fully announced his arrival on the big stage. It would be the last time he would start odds-against until his final race five years later. Jockey Nico de Boinville called himself 'seriously impressed'. Many assumed a career as a top hurdler would ensue, but Henderson knew he had a fast and reliable jumper and immediately switched him to fences. This

switch helped Altior move from the realms of merely ‘excellent’ to those of ‘legend’.

Noel Fehily rode him at home and also took the ride in his first three novice chases, and the jockey did not hold back in his opinion: ‘I remember schooling him before the first one [chase] and in the car home I said then he was the best horse I’ve ever sat on.’ Not many novice chasers win their first race over fences at odds of 2-13 against a future multiple Grade 2 winner (Black Corton) and proceed to defeat them by 63 lengths, but then not every novice chaser is Altior. To confirm this as no fluke, he trotted up to win the Grade 1 Henry VIII Novices’ Chase at Sandown, on only his second start over fences before hammering Marracudja by 18 lengths in the Wayward Lad Novice Chase at Kempton, a performance that the usually fussy and conservative Henderson gave ‘ten out of ten’. He was then thrown in against the more seasoned campaigners in the Game Spirit Chase at Newbury, but was still 13 lengths too good for Fox Norton.

It seemed inevitable that he would be anointed as champion novice in the Arkle Chase at the Cheltenham Festival. He duly obliged by six lengths from Cloudy Dream, and displayed the second of his tics which would be his perennial companion thereafter: halfway through the race, he hit a distinct flat spot and had to be nudged along very early to keep with the leaders, giving false hope to his would-be conquerors, only to rediscover his concentration and burn up the finish to crush the opposition’s spirits. He finished off a perfect season by defeating Champion Chaser Special Tiara in the Celebration Chase at Sandown. People had long stopped calling him a novice.

The 2018 Champion Chase was always going to be Altior’s focus for the 2017/18 season, yet it was largely a season of frustration. The early-season option of the Tingle Creek Chase at Sandown had to be shelved as Altior developed breathing problems that needed surgical intervention. This kept him off the track until February 2018 and the Game Spirit Chase at Newbury, when

nerves about rustiness, especially against Tingle Creek winner Politologue, were rapidly dispelled as Altior ticked all his usual boxes before cruising to victory by four lengths, calming the ever-fractious Henderson, who simply reflected, 'He's just got class.'

Come Cheltenham and his date with destiny, more disaster struck: this time, 48 hours before the race, he came out of his box lame with a foot abscess. Some quick thinking and treatment meant he was just able to make the starting line-up. There, Altior faced many familiar faces, including Min and Politologue. Most intriguingly however, he would also finally meet his great Irish contemporary Douvan, who had injured himself in the race the previous year and had not been on the course since. Douvan may not have been the same horse again after that race, and in any case uncharacteristically fell four fences out. Not that Altior's eventual victory was in any way bloodless, as he landed even with Min over the final fence before engaging the turbo up the thankless Cheltenham hill to win by seven lengths, and take his third consecutive victory at the Festival. Bearing in mind it had been run on very soft ground which Altior absolutely loathed, De Boinville was quick to call it a 'sensational performance'. Henderson concurred: 'To find those gears in that ground off that pace, you have to be pretty good.' He finished the season by easily doubling up at Sandown's Celebration Chase.

He was now 14 races unbeaten, and Big Buck's 18-race winning streak record was not far away. Altior had three things in his favour: his incredible acceleration up a hill like Sandown or Cheltenham at the end of a two-mile chase, which no one could keep up with; long-term soundness, meaning that, barring that breathing problem, he remained fit, healthy and incredibly consistent throughout his career; and his foot-perfect jumping. Not only did he never fall over the 40 miles that he covered on the racecourse, but it never even occurred to anyone that he *might*. The clear aim, despite connections' profuse denials, was to run five times during 2018/19 season to beat the record.



Altior (Nico de Boinville) pings another fence on his way to victory in the Celebration Chase at Sandown, April 2019

On his return in December's Tingle Creek, Altior had to face the superb old-timer Un de Sceaux on the latter's preferred heavy ground and in a horrendous downpour. Despite hating every second of it, he still found a way to grind out a tough four-length victory in one of the races of the season, with De Boinville later recalling it as his favourite performance by the horse who that day matched his huge ability with bags of guts. He had fewer problems both at Kempton's Desert Orchid Chase, where he romped to a 19-length victory on sounder ground, and Ascot's Clarence House Chase where, in a break from the norm, he led most of the way and won by seven unchallenged lengths from Fox Norton.

The defence of his Champion Chase crown was not plain sailing. Navigating his disliked soft ground and a predictably top-class field including perennial rivals Min, Politologue and Sceaux Royal, he wasn't allowed to escape and had his usual problems mid-race. Yet at the business end in a grandstand finish, he nudged

clear of his rivals up the hill to win by just shy of two lengths. It had not been his most spectacular victory but he was now a double Champion Chaser and a four-time Festival winner. De Boinville went so far as to call him 'the best I've ridden', although acknowledged that he had not ridden Sprinter Sacre in his 7yo pomp. With Big Buck's' record now equalled, a predictable trip to Sandown's Celebration Chase was earmarked to try to break it. At odds of 1-6, the nine-year-old Altior did as much as he needed to do in defeating the ever-consistent Sceau Royal two-and-a-half lengths. He had now won 19 National Hunt races in succession, ten at Grade 1, a record that stands to this day and is unlikely to be beaten soon.

Put away for the season, clamour now grew for Altior to try something different the following season, as he had nothing left to prove. Trying a longer distance was the most obvious challenge. A reluctant Henderson, with public opinion putting pressure on him, was badgered to race his star against Paul Nicholls's exciting and huge chaser Cyrname. The latter preferred two-and-a-half miles, and a match-up was chosen over the two-miles-five-furlongs of Ascot's 1965 Chase – half a mile further than Altior had ever run, and with muddy ground to boot. Against his better judgement, Henderson caved and let Altior run. The bubble finally burst, with the distance and ground proving a step too far for Altior as he came a gallant two-length second.

Although he won the Game Spirit again at Newbury in February 2020, another abscess prevented him from matching Badsworth Boy's three Champion Chases. Indeed, he may not have ever been the same again after his Ascot exertions, as the following season he came second in his only two runs, behind very good horses in Nube Negra and Greaneteen whom he should nevertheless have dispatched easily. Now aged 11, and having earned over £1.3 million in prize money, the wise decision was taken to retire him whilst he was still sound and with ultimately little left to prove. Going to live with ex-jockey and TV presenter

Mick Fitzgerald, his adventures weren't quite over, though. Within a year Altior had developed a serious bout of colic. The omens were poor, and the worst was expected, yet the courage Altior had shown before was still with him. As Henderson recounted: 'It's very rare for any horse to survive what Altior has gone through, and I'd go as far as to say that this was as deep as you could go.' But then, Altior had always been a very rare horse, and found a way to pull through, to the huge relief of connections and fans alike.

With another great horse still a fresh memory, Henderson had once reflected: 'It's strange that Altior has come around so soon after Sprinter Sacre. This horse is very, very good and I always said he had very big shoes to fill, but each time he wins he gets closer to doing that.' Some would assert that he got very close indeed. De Boinville's sentiments, meanwhile, were more prosaic: 'Horses like this are what racing needs.'

FACTFILE

Description	Bay Gelding
Dates	2010–
Racing seasons	2014–21
Where were they trained?	UK
Trainer	Nicky Henderson
Owner	Patricia and Christopher Pugh
Jockey	Nico de Boinville, Noel Fehily, Barry Geraghty, K. Harrington
Sire	High Chaparral
Dam	Monte Solaro
Damsire	Key of Luck
Record	26: 21-3-1
Most impressive victory	2018 Champion Chase