

In my lifetime two British trainers have been blessed with a touch of genius: Sir Henry Cecil and Nicky Henderson. This book – via tales about his brilliant horses – takes you on a roller-coaster ride with Nicky’s triumphs and tragedies, heady racedays and disasters, plus gives you a unique insight in to the mind of that training genius.

Ed Chamberlin,
ITV Racing

A beautiful portrait of the love between Nicky Henderson and his greatest horses. Intimate, revealing and unforgettable, with a long reach in racing but also far beyond.

Paul Hayward,
five times Sports Writer of the Year

Nicky Henderson’s career is a timeless masterpiece, with craft and thought put into every horse. The attention to detail in this beautiful book is similarly meticulous. A must read.

Dominic King,
Racing Correspondent, *The Daily Mail*

A brilliant and original portrait of a man with an exceptional gift. Where others see horses, Nicky Henderson sees magic, sophistication and complex personalities – he’s like the Shakespeare of racing.

Ed Needham,
Strong Words magazine

This is a book every racing fan should read. For it takes a fresh look at famous horses and jumping’s most famous trainer. In the very best of senses, it puts new wine in old bottles.

Brough Scott MBE, racing journalist,
broadcaster, author and former jockey

A brilliant insight into the life, knowledge, passion and intuition that Nicky has, and gives his horses on a daily basis. All of which makes him one of the greatest trainers and horsemen of any generation, and above all an absolute gentleman.

Barry Geraghty, first stable jockey to
Nicky Henderson from 2008-2015

A full, personable and bewitching account of the genius that is the six-time champion jumps trainer – while this is a must-read for racing fans, I’d recommend it to anyone who has ever loved an animal.

Martha Terry, *Horse & Hound*

'A unique insight into the mind of a training genius.'

Ed Chamberlin, presenter and director, ITV Racing

NICKY HENDERSON

My Life in 12 Horses

with Kate Johnson



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HAPPY WARRIOR

The willing, winning grey that started it all

‘HE RAN away with me completely. I was going further and further clear, I couldn’t hold him, and finally we turned into the straight and I heard from behind me jockeys screaming “GET OUT OF THE WAY YOU AMATEUR!”’ says Nicky Henderson LVO OBE, fondly.

It was just his second ever spin on Happy Warrior, a colossal and obliging five-year-old grey, given to Nicky by his parents for his 21st birthday, as what may be the world’s most glamorous present. He was an actual amateur jockey, so the chorus from the pros behind him on this two-and-a-half-mile hurdle race at Kempton wasn’t necessarily as insulting as it sounds, and anyway, being yelled at brought him nothing but relief. He was exhausted from being carted around by a horse who raced with genuine enthusiasm, and he couldn’t wait to pull up.

So, ‘I got out of the way’ he remembers, ‘waved them by, and let them all go up my inside. Which obviously you should never do.’ Five thundered past; just the sharpener the Warrior needed, and Nicky reappeared upsides at the last, in his white silks with dark blue hoops, charged to the front and hurtled past the post. Victory! On 16 November 1972, aged 22, his first winner logged and date-stamped into his DNA, with his delighted family watching on.

That's Nicky's version, 50 years on, that he somehow won despite having no control and no clue, hanging on to his beloved berserker. Of course, nobody, but nobody, has ever won a race by incompetence or chance in a sport so uniquely and seriously dangerous that ambulances follow every iteration and where jockeys are so close to each other they can talk without shouting and bang stirrups. Nobody races to come second. A dangerous jockey is a death-wish jockey, and unlikely to get a second spin, even on their own mount, and Nicky is and always was a horseman to his bones; skilful, natural, instinctive as well as a competitive, serious, responsible, amateur jockey.

After his debut at Newbury, his mother had turned to her friend Fred Winter, the esteemed Lambourn trainer where the Warrior was housed and from where Nicky rode out. Bursting with pride, she beamed, 'Didn't he do well!' Fred replied grimly, 'He'll have to do a bloody sight better than that.' And he did, exactly that, in his very next race.

In those days, he'd ride out first thing in the morning for Fred in Lambourn, hotfoot it to London to put in a shift at the stockbroking and investment bank Cazenove, following in his father's distinguished footsteps, then saddle up and race at weekends when he could. He won his next at Towcester too, and the intrepid duo's next stop was Cheltenham. Nicky maintains, 'I rode him appallingly. I went round the world, over Cleeve Hill, round the back of the stands. Fred was fuming. I should have won.' Fred was the pro and Nicky was the amateur and they both wanted to win races but the problem was, it all happened so fast. 'You're at the start, then you're off and if you're not on the ball you get left behind. It took about four goes to find that it's rather easy to get left.'

The falls aren't softer for amateurs, dehydration is no less depleting, and Nicky handled it all, the injuries ('not for the first

time I ended up at Cheltenham General Hospital...'), and making the weight (he weighed 9st 7lb, riding at 9st 12lb, but he was living alone, 'cooking' for himself and a single boiled egg was the only dish on the menu), being permanently dehydrated, spending hours sitting in the local sauna every night, and guzzling 'pee pills' (pill poppers were easy to spot, taken desperately short and having to hop off their horses on returning from the gallops).

Just weeks after that first win, fate sent its wrecking ball, obliterating the familiar landscape and the loving springboard into life, and leaving an indelible line, between what had gone before and what would come after.

* * *

Nicky's adored mother, Katherine Sarah Beckwith-Smith (always known as Sarah) was a natural and accomplished horsewoman. She loved horses, rode beautifully and was joint-master of the Craven Hounds. Nicky recalls one Boxing Day meet at Newbury, which always brought throngs of people to line the main street and watch the hounds. After gathering in the market place, the hunt would set off clattering down the road, led by the master. Always led by the master, it was as infra dig as passing the port to the right to overtake and anyone getting ahead could be sent home in mortifying disgrace. Nicky's pony had no truck with such twee etiquette; ponies have a strong sense of self (the classic small person syndrome balanced on four tiny hooves), often refusing to do what they know full well they are being asked to do, trit-trotting jauntily out of a show ring having flatly refused three times at the first fence. They're also the best partners in crime a child could wish for, inspiring a first love that may never be bettered and leaving them a bit braver than they found them. As the hunt moved, this one chose freedom, over the bridge, the pelican crossing, steaming past

the clock tower, and of course, the masters, at least one of whom found it highly amusing.

* * *

Years later, hundreds of happy miles ridden, Sarah suffered a terrible accident. Nicky says simply, 'She was riding down a road, and she slipped over and banged her head.'

When he recalls it, his natural ebullience temporarily deserts him, his forensic memory too. The needle skids off the record and the music stops. He can't remember who telephoned him in London to tell him the desperate news, or the words they used. He gathered with his brother, sister and father at the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford, where they stayed with family friends for two days. His mother died in hospital aged 46.

'Everybody adored her,' Nicky says, 'she was great fun, she loved life like nobody else. It was party time! She was great, everybody would say she was a very special person. My brother and sister and I have been very lucky and privileged.'

He remembers the idyllic childhood, summers in Scotland learning to fish (he didn't have a passport until he was 19), careening on ponies, the close family ties. Sister Josie agrees, 'It was blissful, we adored each other and we did all the riding together. Nicky was a gorgeous older brother, such a kind person, we were always very good friends.'

* * *

The days after Sarah's death were dark, the siblings too distressed to see that their father Johnny was suffering, 'He lost what he loved too. It was a tough time,' Nicky says now. Josie, then a teen, says, 'It was a terrible time, we were all devastated. It's a difficult subject, we all got through it as best we could. To be honest, 50 years later it's still

a trauma. It was so unexpected ... no chance to say goodbye and it wasn't just us who were devastated. I still see people who remember when it happened and my dad was knocked sideways by it as well.'

After a while, Nicky returned to riding out in the mornings, and banking in the day, feeling 'a lot happier around horses than behind a desk'. There's a lot behind such a simple phrase. As the saying goes, there's something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man. Balancing motionless over the spine of a half-tonne animal with no brakes is all-consuming exercise, and the effort releases feel-good endorphins. Racehorses are walking works of art, even grooming can produce increased levels of serotonin (a mood-boosting chemical that the body produces naturally), and decreased stress levels.

Horses literally know how you're feeling. Dr Leanne Proops from the University of Portsmouth led a study in which horses were shown a photo of either an angry or happy face and then met either the same person or a different person many hours later. The horses that had seen the angry faces showed signs of stress like self-scratching, and looked with their left eye (which goes to the right side of the brain, which deals with threats) when they saw that same person later, but the horses that had seen happy faces or a completely different person, didn't.

Dr Proops describes this as a 'memory for emotion' and says, 'There are some things you feel pretty sure horses can do but this study was able to demonstrate the ability scientifically. If you think about it, there are a lot of complex things that are required: they need to be able to recognise human facial expressions – no easy feat – and they need to individually recognise the person, transfer that recognition from a photo to the real person, and they need to remember both the identity and the emotion for several hours.' It's not just supremely intelligent, she adds, 'It's magical too; they're amazing.'

After an ending, there must be a beginning. Nicky knew he couldn't spend his life at Cazenove. He was adrift, in need of someone to see that they were all in 'a bit of a muddle' and to offer a light through the darkness. That someone was Fred Winter.

'What are you doing?' Fred asked, without inviting an answer. 'You're not enjoying that. Why don't you come and work for me, I need an assistant.'

Nicky replied, 'Can you go and talk to father please, and ask him if I can?' He was expected to follow his dad's career, stay at Cazenove, and take on the family estate too as the first-born son. Fred duly approached Johnny and Nicky was of course released.

'Fred was the hand that came out to rescue me,' he says. 'The whole Winter family became like brothers and sisters, like my family for a couple of years.' He adds, 'He was tough too, it wasn't out of complete sympathy: you're going to work.'

* * *

Work he did; riding out three lots every morning, and learning his craft in the most stellar company. The best horses were housed in 'millionaires' row', with household names like Bula, Crisp, Pendil, and Lanzarote, though Fred's favourites that he adored and rode every day were the violent rogues. 'He fell in love with some very odd characters, moody, moderate horses who went to the races and didn't try – the rascals, brilliant in the morning, absolute monkeys in the afternoon. Fred loved them because he could win every gallop on them. He loved being competitive.'

He was the best trainer, locked in mortal combat with trainer Fulke Walwyn 'over the wall' next door, intense rivals and the best of friends. 'I probably learned as much from head lad Brian Delaney as I did from Fred. He did all the feeding, did the legs, he was in charge of all the problems.'

The riders weren't bad either; none other than John Francome pitched up as a 16-year-old leading showjumper and made everyone else feel like clowns with his perfect balance, like a self-levelling table on an ocean liner. Charlie Mann, a stable jockey at the time, later a trainer, says, 'He didn't move, he just squeezed the horse.' Fred's magpie eye saw it straight away. Nicky says, John 'changed race riding completely. He could see strides – eight strides from a fence – and he could present a horse at a fence: 3-2-1. Jockeys used to ride horses at a fence with very little finesse. There were odd horses he couldn't get on with who wouldn't listen if they didn't like being told what to do, or couldn't understand what he was trying to do, but he was totally unique and fantastic to watch.'

Up until a few years ago, John still rode out for Nicky. 'I'd say, "Do you want to school?" He'd say, "Yes," and I'd get all the kids here and say, "Come and watch this, it's as good as you'll ever see." You can't teach someone to be a good jockey, or, rather, you can only teach so much. AP McCoy and John Francome are 90 per cent natural talent, and the first 75 is hand-eye coordination.'

John plays it down, 'I was in the right place at the right time. I never wanted to be a jockey, I never sat on the back of a chair thinking I was going to be Lester Piggott. I wanted to earn a good living and ride nice horses; it wasn't the be-all and end-all, but I'd spent every hour of the day riding and I knew I could do it. With riding, something clicks, or it doesn't.' He tells any young jockeys asking for advice that, 'The horse is doing 99 per cent of the work, you ought to spend more time thinking about what the horse is doing than what you're doing. If you give someone a piggy back, it's ten times easier to carry them if they sit still than if they're jumping all over the place.'

John is immensely engaging and wears his natural horsemanship so lightly that when he says, 'I could do anything,' he means he'd

service Fred's car, ferry his children to school, and put in a staircase up to the loft. He admits, 'Jumping was never a problem for me. Part of it was seeing a stride, understanding what Fred wanted and what I wanted. You can't teach a horse to jump going too fast. It's a simple thing: you go to the schooling ground, and the way you turn them in to the jump, the first hurdle, it's important how they set off. Whoever wants to be on the outside, wheel round the inside horse, make sure the stick's in the other hand, the one that's a bit green [inexperienced] goes in the middle. It's got to be enjoyable for them and that's what I brought to it.'

To this day, Nicky applies the methods and techniques he learned as Fred's assistant. It's often simple stuff. 'I ask every single rider every single morning, "All OK? All happy?" before we set off and when they come back. Knowing your horses is the most important thing.' John agrees, saying, 'A good lad on a horse he rides every day, should be able to say after going ten yards, this horse doesn't feel right. Some can drive down the road and not know the door's not shut or the window's open; some haven't got out the garage and they know.'

The specifics of Fred's routines wouldn't work today. On Mondays, they'd walk through Lambourn. The sign at the outskirts says, 'Valley of the racehorse' but in those days it was their kingdom too and the realm's benign leaders would trot out to the next village, Eastbury, up the hill, walk down it, trot home. They'd be out for an hour trotting on the roads, 20 horses in two groups of ten always in single file and every Tuesday they'd go to the gallops.

'The art is to trot very slowly – now they all trot too fast – up hill as slow as you can go as it makes them work harder,' Nicky explains. 'There'd be a gap in the middle of the string so cars could pass the first ten and slot in, then the lad at the back would shout "car behind", and the lad at the front would shout "hold it" or "wave

him on". All the cars did exactly as they were told, we controlled the traffic, we were respectful with people trying to get to work or school but Lambourn was all about horses. If I told someone here we did that twice a week, they'd think you'd lost the plot, they'd laugh and say "You can't do that". We only cantered twice a week that's why the lads all got run away with, the horses were so fresh.'

All-weather gallops, infra-red heat lamps, on-site physiotherapists, water treadmills, and heart-rate monitors didn't exist. 'Do we go faster now? No. But we know a lot more now than we did then,' Nicky says. 'We never found out why a horse was lame, because we couldn't scan, and couldn't x-ray, scoping was unheard of. If a horse went lame, we shut it in its box until it was sound, there was nothing you could do. We used to think everything was lame in the shoulder, in fact we very seldom get shoulder injuries, it's almost certainly in the knee, we had no way of finding out.' Accidents and injury time are minimised now, though even with all the science in the world, 'you won't believe what a horse can do, put one in a padded cell and something will go wrong'.

* * *

Come 1977, the increasingly aptly named Happy Warrior was still going strong. That year, he lined up with Nicky for the Fox Hunters' Chase at Aintree; every amateur's dream, in what would be an historic year for the meeting.

Peter O'Sullivan captured the last seconds of the most exciting ten minutes of live sport in the world as Red Rum, ridden by Tommy Stack, took his third Grand National with the words, 'He's coming up to the line to win it like a fresh horse in great style. It's hats off and a tremendous reception, you've never heard one like it at Liverpool! Red Rum wins the National!' The horse pricked his

ears as he passed the post, ecstatic crowds, quite insanely, ran on to the turf to greet him and he was serenaded with 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' in the winner's enclosure.

The bay in the sheepskin noseband attended the ceremony to collect his BBC Sports Personality of the Year award, became the most fleet-of-foot national treasure, is still the most famous horse in Britain, and is credited with renewing the popularity of Aintree, which was under threat from property developers. When Red Rum died aged 30 in 1995 (he is buried at the winning post at Aintree), someone suggested to his trainer Ginger McCain that it must have felt like losing a wife. 'There's 25 million women in this country,' he replied, 'and if I lose the wife, I could certainly get another woman. But I could never get another Red Rum. He was a one-off.'

The crowds were smaller in those days, about 8,000 compared to 70,000 now, but the fences were bigger. You could drive a Mini through the 6ft wide open ditch in front of the 5ft 2in thorn fence of the Chair (one of three fences with a gaping ditch in front). Becher's and Valentine's Brook both had a natural brook 5ft 6in wide on the landing side, so deep it had gates at the end as there was no other way to get a horse out should it end up in there.

Nicky and the Warrior would be jumping all the same fences as Red Rum, one circuit instead of two. Also riding that day was Peter Greenall (now Lord Daresbury). He went on to become chairman of Aintree in 1988 and was responsible for changing the fortunes of the racecourse. First, with the fences, 'We felt we wanted to have public opinion behind Aintree. The statistics were stark, 50 per cent of Grand National racers over a 20-year period fell on the way to Becher's the first time, and that isn't a good experience.' And then improving the experience from the slightly 'shabby' days of the 1980s, bringing in a classy sponsor (Martell), and bumping up the prize money from £180,000 to £1 million.

Back in 1977, Peter was riding Timmie's Battle, and the decades have not dimmed his pleasure in riding a winner as he remembers, 'I rode in the Fox Hunters' seven times and finally won in 1982; it took me a bit of time, on Lone Soldier, at 33/1. JM Wilson rode for Fred Winter and was hot favourite and I beat him.' In the weighing room, he remembers, 'On the big days, the noisy ones were quiet and the quiet ones were noisy. It was a big stage; it's not Ludlow.'

Robert Waley-Cohen was another taking part, and went on to become the chairman of Cheltenham, as well as a hugely successful owner. He remembers getting changed in the old weighing room – now a bar – and feeling the 'ghosts of the nineteenth century heroes, it was an astonishing atmosphere'. He also recalls cantering to the start thinking, 'What on earth am I doing here? I'm completely out of my class. I must be mad.'

Luckily, it passed. 'I felt a great deal better when I got down there and Joey Newton's horse wouldn't stop so he aimed it at the wooden rails. It jumped over, off the racecourse then wouldn't jump back on again. The start was delayed while they sent for an axe to cut down the rail.' He thought, 'I'm going to make a complete fool of myself but hopefully not like that.'

It was a grey, drizzly day and the loud speaker system had conked out. 'Somebody had a fall at the Chair and lay on their back staring at the sky while the ambulances drove past him,' Robert says, 'My wife was heavily pregnant in the stands, and worried that if I fell off at the furthest end of the course, no one would know and they'd never find me.'

Like any sportsperson, he remembers this most daunting of races as though it were yesterday. His worries that he was out of his depth were unfounded. 'We got to the Canal Turn and we went so tight we gained quite a lot of ground and went from not being anywhere to fourth. We hit a perfect stride at Valentine's

and sailed over it. It's the nearest thing you can get to flying on a horse; properly big fences, enormous drops ... you're in the air for an awfully long time.'

The romance of Valentine's was lost on Nicky. 'At that point I realised for some reason, his neck was getting longer and longer. The saddle had started to go backwards and backwards, I thought I was going to run out of rein and I was sat on his backside.' It got worse, the girth now working its way to the Warrior's rear end, and as they came round the bend to the straight, the saddle began slipping to one side. Nicky was throwing his weight the other way to get it back in the middle where it belonged. All of this at a racing gallop in a field of half-tonne horses trying to barrel past him.

As he was attempting to throw the saddle over, he slammed into Rusty Tears (his jockey later objected but was overruled) and somehow he survived the last two fences before he claimed victory. It was a courageous, exceptionally adept ride and a tremendous win. Back in the winner's enclosure, Fred had one question, 'Why did you let him up your inside?' 'I didn't have a saddle,' Nicky answered.

The Warrior hadn't worn a breast girth. When kit was being assigned the night before, it was decided he didn't need one but the fences had upright stakes made of birch which would catch their girths, and the size of the fences meant the horse had to reach more.

'I've never sent a horse out since without a breast girth. Every single horse I run wears a white one since that day,' Nicky says of the distinctive look that gives his horses the air of breasting the tape in an old fashioned 100yd dash.

The other lesson Nicky learned from that day is how surprisingly friendless it feels to be at the start of the Grand National course. 'It's the loneliest place you'll ever be, walking round and round in endless circles on your horse that can't talk to you. You look at the stands and there are a million people looking at you, on televisions

round the world, people are looking at you, all talking and giggling and there's just 40 of you walking round.

'It's the only time you'll see jockeys quiet in the weighing room before the race, it isn't the usual banter. You know it's different. You get to the start, and it's quiet, you can't hear anything, but you know. You're sat on your own, you're all thinking it's about to start, it'll be cut-throat and flat out and it's a very lonely place for five minutes.'

So, whenever he's had a National runner, he goes to the start with them, walks round with his jockey, checks the girth, chats, waves them off with a 'go out and enjoy yourselves' and then dashes to a vantage point.

* * *

It's no surprise that Fred wasn't sympathetic when Nicky was in danger of disappearing out the side door of the Warrior. No horseman knows all there is to know about these enigmatic equine athletes, but Fred must have come close. He'd been champion jockey four times, winning the races that every jockey dreams of – two Grand Nationals, two Gold Cups, three Champion Hurdles. And they weren't even his greatest achievements as a jockey; at the 1962 Grand Steeple Chase de Paris in Auteuil he partnered Fulke Walwyn's horse, Mandarin. He was weak, from starving himself to make the weight, the horse was ridden in a rubber-covered steel bit, and it snapped in his mouth at the fourth of 30 fences around a four-mile figure of eight course. If he'd been driving, it would have been like the brake cable snapping, the steering wheel coming loose in his hands and the accelerator pedal jamming on, all in three lanes of traffic. In a feat of supreme prowess, and the uplifting superhuman nobility that only reveals itself in rare sporting moments, they stayed the course, they won the race. And the one after.

Fred turned to training after riding, when the Jockey Club bafflingly rejected him for a starter's job. He was champion eight times. He won the Grand National with his first two runners in the race. He was firm, fair, brilliant and true, a man by whom jockeys and trainers will be forever measured. His eye was remarkable, his methods still used by his former protégés today, who learned by looking. Fred didn't go in for explanations and so much about horses can't be taught or even put into words.

Nicky and John Francome knew better than to talk to him before 10am and in John's 15 years with Fred, ('a wonderful loyal person'), he never made it as far as his kitchen. He usually drove him to the races four days a week, when he'd be 'lucky to get six words'. At the end of the meeting, he'd change out of his silks, drive home, never stop on the way, never go into the house for a drink. Years later, John was startled to discover there were bars at racecourses. He says, 'You were taught to do it properly, he trained how he wanted. If at the end of the year, he'd made money, that was good, if he hadn't, not the end of the world, there was never a question that we weren't going to steam clean the boxes or clean the tack or the rugs at the end of the season, or have the best food and hay. It would be impossible to go and work for anyone else.'

The attention to detail was a searchlight that could see round corners; Albert Browne (known by all except Fred as Corky as he came from Cork) worked in the yard and remembers walking home one day with a bunch of daffodils. Fred appeared upsides in his car. 'Can I give you a lift, Albert?' 'No thanks.' 'Come on, those flowers look heavy. I've got some just like them, same colour.' 'Is that right?' 'Yes, in my garden, who are they for?' 'My wife, Diane.' 'I hope she enjoys them.'

* * *

To ride at any level is to accept risk, though some might be startled that what happened to Nicky's mother didn't put him off horses. 'It certainly didn't,' he says, 'When I came right, I decided I was going to give this a go, and Dad was fantastic, and gave me the opportunity to do it. He may have thought, this won't last long, and is going to cost a few quid, we'll soon find out. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he thought, what on earth are you doing?'

Johnny died aged 83, and for years after, Nicky would think, what do I do about this and that? I know! I'll ring up the old man and see-what-he-thinks-oh-no-I-can't. Having been denied the chance of an adult relationship with his mother, there must have been hundreds of times too when he thought, I'd love to talk to mum about this horse? 'Oh, not just about horses,' he says, 'about anything.'

When Nicky was established as a trainer, Johnny used to write to him after a big race and say, 'wouldn't Mum be proud'. 'That's why it's important she saw me ride my first winner,' he says. 'She'd seen the start, but she never saw this end, and she would have loved it. I hope Dad was proud, I think he was. Nobody knew it was going to finish up like this. I suppose I always assumed I'd be a stockbroker who had a few rides.'

After five years as assistant trainer, he ended his jockey career with 75 wins, including the Imperial Cup on Fred's Acquaint, and five hunter chases on Rolls Rambler, which culminated in the Horse and Hound Cup Final Champion Hunters' Chase at Stratford on 3 June 1978, his last ride.

It was time for Nicky to move on, Fred knew it too, and told him to find his replacement.

* * *

Oliver Sherwood heard the best assistant trainer's job in the country might be up for grabs and wrote to Fred and Nicky. Nicky's letter

back was encouraging, with the joke-but-not-really that he'd need to bring a very good horse with him. His father's Venture to Cognac would do. Later he added a second condition; if he got the job, he'd have to buy Nicky's house, Frisky's Place (named after the previous owner, truly).

When Oliver came for his trial, the Gold Cup, postponed to April due to snow, was won by John Francome on Fred's Midnight Court. It must have felt like the time was right and the stars were aligned. They weren't. Oliver's host, Nicky, had broken his collarbone. Painful, to mortals, yet a jockey's first thought is not the pain, but how long they'll be off for. Oliver was pressed into service. 'I remember being woken up a couple of times in the night by his screams for help. He got cast in his bed and I had to go and rescue him.' Frustrated by 'medical' advice from 'doctors' that said it was too 'dangerous' to ride, he was a 'bloody awful patient, useless, screaming like a banshee cat'.

It wasn't the try-out he thought it would be, but Oliver got the job. He found Fred chilling – actually frightening – and inspiring in equal measure. Schooling horses, this fledgling amateur jockey with a handful of winners found himself upside the inimitable John Francome and realised that 'throwing' horses at fences wouldn't do, they needed to learn how to do it themselves, in tight, at speed. This discovery came in the form of Fred yelling at him, 'DON'T DO THAT! HE'S A YOUNGSTER! HE'S GOT TO LEARN TO FIDDLE'. When Oliver was about to board Venture to Cognac in the 1979 Sun Alliance Novices' Hurdle for his first Festival ride, his dad said, 'Enjoy yourself Oliver.' Fred was immediately on hand to bark, 'Of course he can't enjoy it now! He can enjoy it afterwards. This is a serious business.'

Oliver also says you wouldn't find a kinder man than Fred, with a twinkle in his eye, a talent-spotter supreme – Richard Pitman,

John Francome, Charlie Brooks were just some of the names that passed through his hands – and a zero-tolerance policy for anyone playing what Oliver calls ‘the giddy arse’. ‘One day, I didn’t turn up because I’d overslept, it was a snowy, frosty day so we didn’t pull out on time, but he drove down and knocked on my door.’ Long story short: it never happened again.

He worked for Fred for six years, married Fred’s daughter then set up as a trainer in the same village and to this day, he keeps the same routine – easy days, work, schooling and road work – and he and Nicky have been true friends ever since. He regularly solicits Nicky’s advice, admires him, and regularly reminds the six-time champion trainer that ‘he’s never won a National, and I don’t mean the Grand National, I mean any National’.

* * *

The due diligence that Nicky applied when buying his first yard from his pal the trainer Roger Charlton, amounted to no more than Roger saying, ‘Why don’t you buy Windsor House?’ and Nicky replying, ‘That’s a good idea.’ The deal was done over steak and chips.

Happy Warrior would come with him. Next, he needed a head lad. Corky had been a mainstay at Fred’s for years, overlapping with Nicky. He was working elsewhere when Nicky knocked on his door one evening. Corky squinted at him and after a while said, ‘Henderson, isn’t it? What can I do for you?’ He’d never found out his first name.

‘He sat down for a drink and said, “I’m going training,”’ Corky remembers. “Good for you, what’s it got to do with me?” It took a second attempt the following night, this time with a bottle of whisky, to persuade him. Word got out and Corky remembers how dismissive Fred’s lads were about the news. ‘We

were a laughing stock. Corky as head lad and Nicky as trainer! What a joke.' And yet, Corky became Nicky's head lad, and the arrangement would stay in place for 41 years, sparking the most glittering career.