



"NO PLACE FOR A GIRL"

How One Female Jockey
Broke into an Exclusive Men's Club

KAREN
WILTSHIRE

with
Nick Townsend

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*The following is a true story, but some
names and details have been changed.*

Chapter 1

‘What Do You Think You’re F***** Doing Woman?’

Warwick racecourse. Early spring, 1979

CREAM CAKES. Huge, sickly cream cakes. The thought of demolishing just one had preoccupied me all the way to the course. That’s what a near-starvation diet does to you. Normally I didn’t even care for the things.

But as a young woman with one obsession in life I was not living a normal existence.

Shedding pounds dominated most of my waking hours. The most spartan of Weight Watchers regimes had nothing on my schedule. ‘Wasting’ had become a way of life. It had to be if I was to continue to satisfy an even more voracious hunger: for a successful career as one of the country’s few female professional jockeys; a number so few, I was only aware of one other at that time.

I had arrived here to ride in the 4.45, the Haseley Handicap, for which my mount, a four-year-old filly named Ardtully Lass, was set to carry 7st 13lb. Handicaps are races that tend to attract large fields because all horses participating carry weights relating to their current form – the best carry the biggest burdens – and on paper that means many have some sort of a chance.

Another 7lb was deducted because I was an apprentice, and that meant taking my riding gear and saddle into account, I'd had to get down to barely over 7st. My natural weight was around 8st 7lb. I had got that down to 7st 7lb with an, at times, tortuous 'wasting' regime over the previous two years, a period in which I had spent far too long in a battle with the scales. I could get my weight even lower, with some notice.

A lengthy sauna session the night before and fasting over the previous 24 hours had dominated my preparatory schedule. I was not alone in adopting such a lifestyle. There were some diminutive male jockeys who could do light weights, but there were those of a larger frame who struggled to make the weights demanded. The legendary Lester Piggott, at 5ft 7in, was said to exist on coffee, cigars and dry toast.

As I quietly cantered my horse to the start, the dank chill cut through to the flesh beneath my lightweight racing silks and breeches. I shivered, from hunger as much as cold. But not from nerves. A feeling of exhilaration outweighed any discomfort I felt. I sensed my filly was not without a chance in an open race.

I glanced at the opposition. The race had attracted a large field: 23 other horses, partnered by 23 men. Some of the jockeys stared at me. Perhaps glared may be a better description in the case of a few. No words were exchanged, but I knew that many felt I shouldn't be there.

These men were quite content for females to ride – as long as they knew their place. And that place was in their own company in amateur events. This world was their domain, those expressions said, and was no place for a woman. I felt their stance was: 'You shouldn't even be *trying* to be as good as us.' Some of these characters were journeymen; hardened to life in the saddle,

leathery featured, vastly experienced. Others, though, were in the infancy of their careers.

How contrasting their fates would be. Among the riders at the start that day, John Reid would develop into a Classic-winning jockey. The 1992 Derby victor Dr Devious would be among his tally of nearly 2,000 winners. Another of my rivals that day was Joe Blanks, an apprentice I had often ridden against. Two years later, he would be killed when a fall at Brighton led to him being trampled by a number of following horses. Throughout its long, rich existence, this has been a sport fraught with danger.

As for me, I knew not what the future held, but I lacked neither desire nor confidence. One momentous day the previous September, when I had become the first female professional jockey to win a race, had settled any doubts on that score.

Not that my historic feat had received anything like the attention it would today, for reasons I will detail later. Indeed, most racegoers on this day at Warwick would have assumed my mount was partnered by a man. Why would they have known any better?

Today a jockey's first and last names are spelled out on race cards and in the national media alongside their mount. Back then, just a first initial and surname sufficed: L preceding Piggott. W before Carson. P before Eddery. And, in my case, K before Wiltshire.

As far as spectators were concerned, it could have been Kevin Wiltshire. Indeed, at the command of the veteran Hampshire-based trainer, Bill Wightman, to whom I had been apprenticed, I went to extreme lengths to conceal my gender.

The starting stalls clanged open, and immediately a rhythmic thud of hooves on turf competed with a cacophony of curses being hurled by my rival jockeys. Some were exchanged between

themselves, but I was the target of many. I remember them to this day. 'Get out of the f***** way,' someone cursed me. 'You c***,' was how another voice assailed my ears. 'What do you think you're f***** doing woman,' someone warned me when I attempted to push my way through a gap.

A few years previously, my convent-educated self would have been utterly shocked, not just by the language, but by the fact that much of it was directed at me. I had long before become accustomed to it. I was damned if I'd allow such abuse to cow me. I was familiar with such hostility by now and had largely become hardened to it. On the contrary, it made me all the more determined. It made me aggressively competitive and I took more risks than I probably should have done.

A characteristic of Warwick, a left-handed course, is an exceptionally sharp turn before the home straight. That means jockeys invariably head for the advantage of a place on the inside rail. The number of runners this day – a sizeable field on any racecourse – all seeking the best position inevitably produced frantic scrimmaging. By any judgement, it was a rough passage.

I had expected the congestion to produce some bumping and barging and, just for an instant, my filly was knocked off balance by a rival, virtually going down on her knees, but we somehow managed to continue. Yet, if I had anticipated the verbal abuse and the hurly-burly at the start of the race, I was utterly unprepared for what happened next. It wasn't just the stinging pain that made me seethe as a rival jockey's whip caught me hard across my unprotected backside. It was the humiliation.

I knew it was no accident. I was furious, but I couldn't dwell on it. I knew I had to concentrate on getting the best placing for my horse. Ardtully Lass finished in mid-field. Given the

skirmishing early on, it was a decent result on the filly's seasonal debut on the Flat. I also felt she would have benefitted from a longer distance.

But the indignity I experienced during the whip incident was not over yet. After dismounting, as I made my way back to the weighing room, I became aware of a trainer staring at me in a rather strange way. Perhaps he wished to offer me a ride on one of his horses? Optimistically, I pondered the thought.

I strolled past him, but the trainer approached me from behind and tapped me on the shoulder. 'Er, Miss,' he muttered politely, before rather hesitatingly adding: 'Did you know your breeches are split?' He should have stopped there. Instead, he offered a well-intentioned but rather clumsy explanation: 'Those breeches weren't made for women's backsides ...'

Still simmering from the treatment meted out to me, I was horrified by what he had told me. To do the low weight allotted to my mount in this race, every ounce had been crucial and even my underwear had to be minimal. Bear in mind, this was a male sanctuary. A large number of trainers and jockeys were milling around, and all were men. Fortunately, another trainer spared me further embarrassment by offering to walk close behind me, gallantly averting his gaze while protecting me from that of the public's, to the privacy – as I thought – of the lady jockeys' 'changing room'.

The racecourse had thoughtfully created a partitioned-off area of the men's changing room – although on this day I was the sole occupant. Before then, at other tracks, I had changed with the men – without anyone being aware I was a woman. Bill would register me as K. Wiltshire for races and no one was ever the wiser about my gender.

I slumped down, exhausted and dejected in my bra and pants. My ordeal was by no means over, though. One of the well-known jockeys from my race jumped over the partition.

'Hey, get out. This is the women's changing room,' I yelled, grabbing a towel to protect my modesty.

'Don't worry, love. I've seen it all before,' he replied with a shrug, continuing as though his presence was the most natural thing in the world.

'How did you do in the race? Any spare soap? Don't worry about me. It won't take long. It's a fight to get near the wash basin in our room. It must be lovely being a girl and having your own room.'

He then attempted to grab and kiss me. I screamed and fought him off and he jumped back over the partition when he heard someone coming to my rescue. I dressed slowly, ate the last cream cake in the cafeteria, and stopped for fish and chips on the way home ...

Weeks later, at a racecourse on the other side of the country, Steve Woolley, another apprentice jockey at my stables, was asked about the girl jockey who had showed her backside to all and sundry. Yes, he told them, he knew her well ...

This was my life as a pioneering professional female jockey in the so-called progressive 1970s. The nation may have been about to elect Britain's first female prime minister, but horseracing wasn't so accommodating to the distaff side.

Today, such a sequence of events would be unthinkable. It would be inconceivable that the now-retired Irish horsewoman Nina Carberry, over jumps, say, or the prejudice-defying Hayley Turner in her pomp on the Flat, would suffer such treatment. But it has to be placed in context. It had only been four years earlier, in 1975, that women had been allowed to gain a firm foothold in

the stirrup and compete as professional Flat jockeys on racetracks. The principal concern, apparently, was safety. Patronisingly, race-riding was considered a highly dangerous sport for women. Men, apparently, had to accept the perils as an occupational hazard, as a means of earning their families a living. Then, in the mid-1970s, legislation brought in meant women had every right to take their chance in one of the few major professional sports in which men and women compete against each other on equal terms.

Despite that, many professional male jockeys didn't feel comfortable about a woman in their midst. And certainly, as far as I was aware, few trainers had shown immediate inclination to take advantage of the supposed new equality of opportunity and recruit female apprentices. I only achieved that distinction because my employer, Bill Wightman, in many other respects a traditionalist, was a rarity among racehorse trainers at that time in being an enthusiastic advocate of women riders and prepared to take on a female apprentice with a view to turning her into a jockey. It was a significant staging post in the progress of women jockeys.

Emphatically what Bill didn't want, however, was for me to become a *cause célèbre*. The Jockey Club, which ran racing then, wouldn't like it, I was told.

The cumulative result was that I had arrived on the scene in the late 1970s in what could be described as a blaze of anonymity. That suited me just fine. I was determined to concentrate minds on my riding talent, not the fact that I was a woman trying to cut it in what was regarded then as an exclusive boys' club.

But what I hadn't appreciated when I first approached Bill – more than a little naively, I concede – and asked him to take me on, were the agonies, physical and mental, I would have to overcome in order to reach my goal.