

Friday One day I'm going to stand for Parliament and, if I get in, my first Bill will be to abolish Flat racing and my second to do away with hurdlers'

BY DAVID ASHFORTH 19 JANUARY 2010

CAPTAIN Tim Forster was sitting in his battered Range Rover at the top of the gallops, on the Downs near Letcombe Bassett, waiting for his slowcoach chasers to lumber into view. When the first of them finally did, ears flopping, it was a horse about to run at Sandown's annual military meeting, where Forster regularly had runners. Sitting next to him, I asked why he liked the military races so much. "It's because I used to be able to ride in them," he said. "I was excited about it for weeks beforehand. It was a tremendous thrill, falling off at the first fence."

That was Forster. I met him only a few times but, when I did, he made me laugh, as he made many others laugh. What he said, the way he said it, the way he looked, the lugubrious, bloodhound expression, the droll tone, the impeccable timing, the fatalistic pessimism. Forster had that rare, wonderful quality of making you feel better as soon as you saw him, and ready to laugh, before he said anything. He was also a kind man. On the other hand, he was said to have delivered some fearsome bollockings. A legacy of his army days, perhaps.

Forster seems to have been born at Cold Ashby Hall, Northamptonshire, in 1934, the son of Lieutenant-Colonel Douglas Forster. Schooled at Eton, he went into the 11th Hussars - possibly because they had taken part in the charge of the light brigade - served in Malaya, Cumbria and Northern Ireland and, in 1957, rode a winner at the Vale of the White Horse Hunt's point-to-point meeting at Siddington, Gloucestershire.

More than 30 years later, when I asked what his ambition was, Forster replied: "To win the Gold Cup and own the winner of the maiden at the Torrington Farmers' point-to-point." Asked to name his best day's racing, he found it difficult to choose between winning the Grand National, three times, and the Stag Hunts Cup at the Devon and Somerset point-to-point, with When In Rome. "I love it down there and got a hell of a kick out of it," he explained.

It was fitting that, having taken out a licence in 1962, and moved into the Old Manor House in Letcombe Bassett, near Lambourn, his first winner as a trainer was in the United Hunts' Chase at the 1963 Cheltenham Festival, with the redoubtable hunter chaser Baulking Green.

Forster, a man of principle, had firm views about what constituted a proper horse, and a proper racecourse. Proper racecourses had fences and unsuccessful drainage systems - Towcester was a particular favourite - resulting in the sort of going (soft) that proper horses required to be rewarded for their fine qualities, which included a substantial physique, sound jumping, ample stamina and a resolute attitude. Speed was not highly prized, despite the fact that his father had owned Light Harvest, winner of the 1956 Wokingham Stakes at Royal Ascot. When Jeremy Tree, a

Classic-winning trainer of well-bred Flat horses, described Forster as "a brilliant judge of a very slow horse", Forster regarded it as a compliment and glowed with rare pride.

"I don't know anything about Flatracebreeding," he once told me, pointing, not altogether approvingly, at Cheerful Aspect, who had recently won a juvenile hurdle. "Evidently he's by Cadeaux Genereux, who I'm told was a sprinter." Singularly unimpressed by the bluest of bloodlines, Forster preferred to dwell on the memory of two trainers standing together, watching a selling hurdle. As the leader galloped by, one remarked: "He's by Nijinsky, you know, beautifully bred." "I'm beautifully bred, too," replied the other trainer, "but I'm f***ing useless, as well."

Forster might have enjoyed training Nijinsky, but only if he could jump an open ditch. Sprinter was a word that rarely passed his lips and hurdlers were tolerated only on condition that they did the decent thing and matured into proper horses, called chasers.

Forster thoroughly approved of Tom Dreaper, Arkle's trainer, not least because of Dreaper's contention that "there'd only be one thing worse than a Flat race, and that would be a hurdle race". Forster famously declared: "One day I'm going to stand for Parliament and, if I get in, my first Bill will be to abolish Flat racing and my second to do away with hurdlers."

He dismissed the Triumph Hurdle, saying: "It doesn't count. It's a Flat race."

Whenever one of his horses won a hurdle race, he seemed slightly embarrassed and, when Sun Surfer won the valuable Tolworth Hurdle at Sandown in 1993, Forster confessed: "It's a terrible thing to say but, although I was thrilled to bits, I'd rather have seen one jump the last really well in the novice chase."

THE slow-maturing chasers that got Forster's blood flowing required owners with healthy lifespans and plenty of patience. Looking forward to overseeing the education of the stoutly bred Ring For Rosie, Forster remarked: "When she was two, I told her owner that she'd be no good until she was seven or eight." To his surprise, Ring For Rosie won a novice hurdle when she was six, a victory he regarded with mixed feelings, as he did when, a few weeks later, Holloa Away unexpectedly won a bumper on his debut.

"I can only suppose it was one of the worst bumpers run in the British Isles in the last 25 years," said Forster. If he was the beneficiary of a stroke of good fortune, Forster seemed to feel that the natural order had been disturbed, and he was more comfortable relating that he had placed one horse "appallingly" and "totally ballsed up" another. For Forster, disaster was the normal state of affairs.

Pinned to the shelves of the bookcase behind his well-worn armchair were cards declaring 'The situation is hopeless and getting worse' and 'Yesterday was a dead loss, today is even worse, tomorrow is cancelled'. Ambrose Bierce, author of *The Devil's Dictionary*, would have approved of Forster, and Forster of Bierce, who defined an optimist as 'a proponent of the doctrine that black is white'.

A dedicated pessimist, Forster was fatalistic about his pessimism, explaining, in a resigned, accepting tone: "You're either an optimist or a pessimist. I'm a pessimist. You can't do anything about it. It's the way you're born. It's much better to be an optimist, except that, if you're always expecting the worst and something good happens, you're extra chuffed."

Forster was not, therefore, prone to sending jockeys on their way buoyed by encouraging predictions of the experience that awaited them. Memorably, before Ben Nevis won the 1980 Grand National, he instructed jockey Charlie Fenwick to "keep remounting" and, before Last Suspect won the 1985 National, Forster told owner Anne, Duchess of Westminster: "I'll meet you at the back of the stands, after they've caught him."

In 1972, there hadn't been much time to give winning jockey Graham Thorner his instructions on Well To Do, because Forster only decided it was worth running him 15 minutes before the race. Forster owned as well as trained Well To Do, who had been left to him by Heather Sumner when she died the previous year. The Sumner family were stalwart supporters, for whom Forster trained literally hundreds of winners, including John Sumner's Royal Marshall and the hugely popular Dublin Flyer.

With hindsight, Forster regarded his fine early record at the Cheltenham Festival as a puzzling aberration, and the barren period that followed as a fascinating display of fate's inevitable mockery. With Baulking Green winning the United Hunts' Chase four times, Forster had festival doubles in 1964 (Baulking Green and Take Plenty), 1973 (Denys Adventure and Hinterland) and 1979 (Casbah and Redundant Punter). Although it was 18 years before his next festival winner, he had few runners, and several that were placed. Forster believed that Drumadowney, who finished fourth in the 1985 Gold Cup, might have won had he not hit the third-last fence hard, while Cherrykino, owned by Anne, Duchess of Westminster, fell and was killed in the 1993 edition of the race. The following year Coonawara, unbeaten in his previous nine races, fell at the third-last when leading in the Arkle.

That year, Forster moved to Downton Hall stables in Shropshire, owned by Michael Wiggin, a lifelong friend and chairman of Ludlow racecourse. When asked if it had taken him long to get used to the new gallops, Forster replied: "There weren't any." Having installed an uphill all-weather

gallop and adopted Martin Pipe's interval training methods, he reported, dolefully: "You know the worst thing about it? It works."

THERE had always been a steady flow of fine chasers and big-race successes - Royal Marshall in the 1974 Hennessy and 1976 King George, Pegwell Bay in the 1988 Mackeson Gold Cup and AF Budge Gold Cup, Dublin Flyer in the 1994 Tripleprint Gold Cup and 1995 Mackeson and, then, towards the end, Martha's Son.

In 1991, after Martha's Son won a novice hurdle at Stratford, Forster told owner-breeder Michael Ward-Thomas: "I will never, as long as I train, win a steeplechase with this horse. He will never jump fences." Later, Forster took characteristic pleasure in relating how Martha's Son had then won nine chases in a row. In 1994-95 they included the Peterborough Chase at Huntingdon and the Victor Chandler and Comet Chases at Ascot but, in December 1995, a leg injury ended plans to run Martha's Son in the King George VI Chase. "So that solves the jockey problem," Forster observed.

When Martha's Son returned, at Kempton in February 1997, he fell at the second fence. Less than three weeks later, he ran in the Queen Mother Champion Chase at Cheltenham. Martha's Son had never run at Cheltenham before and, with his tendency to jump flat and low, was far from certain to shine. My final memory of Forster is of bumping into him immediately after Martha's Son's victory. "I never thought he'd get round," I said. Forster's face lit up, as if everything was suddenly back where it belonged. "Neither did I," he said, animatedly. "I was sure he'd clip the top of one and turn over."

Martha's Son went on to win the Melling Chase at Aintree while, the following year, Forster received the George Ennor Trophy for outstanding achievement at the Horserace Writers' Awards, marking the occasion by registering a plea for jump racing to be protected, "before I burst into tears". In the 1999 New Year's Honours list, he was awarded the OBE for services to horseracing.

By then, Forster was seriously ill.

With stoic courage and undimmed humour, he defied multiple sclerosis and cancer for as long as they could be denied and, when he died, aged 65, in 1999, the tributes that poured forth were a telling measure of the huge respect and affection felt for him, as great as the affection he felt for steeplechasing.