

RICHARD HUGHES AUTOBIOGRAPHY

My job was getting in the way of my drinking but at the time I didn't care

Two revealing extracts from **Richard Hughes's** autobiography *A Weight Off My Mind*



IN HIS autobiography, *A Weight Off My Mind*, Richard Hughes offers an illuminating insight into his life as one of racing's leading riders. However, he also provides the frankest possible account of his alcoholism. He overcame his demons and writes inspirationally about his recovery, but not before shining a light on the power of the disease and its long hold over him.

MARRIAGE did not make me a better person. At least not at first. It certainly did nothing to curtail my love affair with alcohol. I drank, and then I drank some more, increasingly at the expense of everyone and everything that mattered in my life.

Racing started to become an inconvenience. In the years that followed my wedding to Lizzie I won some of the biggest races of my career but the buzz those successes gave me was very often minimal. My job was getting in the way of my drinking, but at the time I did not care.

My feelings towards racing were almost wholly negative. It was only later, when I looked in the mirror and set about changing myself, that I realised that drinking was affecting

my abilities as a rider.

I could see that Ryan Moore, then a young up-and-coming jockey with Richard Hannon, was riding considerably better, and far sharper, than the jockey to whom he was supposed to be deputy. That annoyed and eventually motivated me, but not for a while yet. For at my lowest ebb I was thoroughly and helplessly dependent on alcohol.

By 2004 the situation had reached a point where I could not remember the last day on which I had not downed a drink. That's not to say that I was getting pissed on a daily basis. There were long periods when I remained sober, but not a day went by when I did not have at least one or two beers. I was trying to get every day over as quickly as possible and I was using alcohol to make that happen.

There were occasions when I was inexcusably rude and unpleasant to Lizzie, but I had no positive feelings towards myself, let alone anyone else. It was a regular occurrence for me to drink and drive. There is a long stretch of road near home that I use almost daily. I would often speed down it at 120 miles per hour. I used to ask myself, what would happen if a deer suddenly jumped out on to the road? I decided that I didn't care. I would just carry on regardless.

At no point did I ever directly contemplate suicide but nor did I ever think twice about smashing speed limits whilst pissed or the consequences, to myself and others, that might come from my actions.

Towards the end of 2004 the situation was reaching crisis point. My wife and my job were playing second fiddle to alcohol like never before. I have an addictive personality, and I had never been more addicted.

I therefore reacted with inner glee when Lizzie told me that she had to go to Australia. Her brother Henry, who had been out there on holiday, had been taken into hospital and needed surgery so Lizzie was heading over to offer love and support. Shamefully, I saw the news as a way of getting rid of her for a while.

I had my plan organised within minutes of her telling me the news. I would drop her off at Heathrow and then drive to west London, where my old friend and occasional drinking buddy James Collins was living with his wife Fiona.

WHEN I rang James, who had worked alongside me for Dad when we were much younger, he readily agreed to me staying with them for a few days.

What I did not know was that James planned to use the visit to tell me a few home truths.

As soon as I got to his house, I was dragging him off down the pub. We spent most of day one in O'Riordans Tavern, a popular Irish pub situated near Kew Gardens in Brentford. I drank myself into the ground and was dragged home by James, who, now not just older but wiser, remained in one piece.

The following morning I was fine because on following mornings I was always fine. I never once suffered from a hangover. And now, as ever, I wanted to be down the pub. I kept urging James out of the door. Finally he relented and we returned to O'Riordans. By one o'clock I had already finished off three pints. James had barely touched his first. I wanted him to join in the fun and was annoyed by his reluctance to keep up

with me. Then he came out with it.

"You're an alcoholic," he said. I told him to fuck off.

"You're a fucking alcoholic," he said.

The words seemed cruel, unnecessary, and absolutely accurate.

I shouted back at him: "I know I'm an alcoholic, but just leave me alone."

He left the pub.

Many hours later, I got back to his house. I was not prepared to listen, but the following day I was given no choice. He told me once again that I was an alcoholic. He said that every time he rang me I was in a pub with a drink in my hand or, worse still, driving home from the races with a can in my hand.

He said that I was half the jockey I should be and that I was throwing away my career and my life. He said that he was certain that I knew every word he was telling me was true.

Given where the words were coming from, I did. I had been best man at James's wedding. I thought the world of him. Lizzie had told me until she was blue in the face that I needed to sort myself out. I had always blocked out her words. When the words came from a more dispassionate source they somehow carried more weight.

I listened to what James said, then packed my bag, got into the car and drove home. Once inside and with the door shut behind me I broke down and wept. I can't explain why, but it was only when James confronted me that I confronted my problem. Maybe I was reaching that point anyway, but I shall always be thankful to him for making me see myself as others were



seeing me. James had threatened to ring Dad, but I did not need him to. I phoned Dad and told him I was coming home. I waited until I was sat with him and Mam before explaining why I was back.

When I did I broke down and wept all over again. Mam burst into tears as well, but Dad put his arm around me and told me that everything would be all right. He told me where I needed to go.

The person he knew could help me was Johnny Murtagh.

What on earth are you doing – running a whorehouse?

WHILE parts of *A Weight Off My Mind* are deeply serious, Hughes also uses the book to convey the light-hearted character for which he is famous. Take, as an example, the time when, as a young rider in Ireland, he moved in with friends to the house situated on land adjacent to father Dessie's Curragh yard.

MOVING out of the family home was a wonderful feeling, one comparable to the day I left school for the last time. Then, as now, I adored Mam and Dad, but I was a young man who craved independence. I now had it.

Every day I still walked around the hedge that separated me from them and came into work, but I wasn't like one of those students who gets his mother to do the washing at

weekends. We cooked, we cleaned and we supported ourselves. For the first time ever, I was in control of my own life and in a position to make my own decisions. I was in charge.

I had a good time as well. In January 1992 I turned 19. I was earning decent money and had a place of my own. There was craic to be had and I was intent on having it, including with some of the young ladies of Kildare town. What I didn't want was to be tied down. These were supposed to be fun years, and for the most part they were exactly that.

Women were not infrequent visitors to the house. I remember riding out for Dad one morning alongside James Collins. Dad was also on horseback at the front of the string when he led us past the large window that ran along the front of my house. At the precise moment

that Dad was going past the window and admiring the front garden, a young woman walked across the other side of the window, a bowl of cornflakes in her hand and not a stitch of clothing on her body. It was like a scene from a situation comedy. Dad seemed not to notice her at first and almost did a double take on the horse, putting it into reverse to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him. They weren't.

"What on earth are you doing in there?" he said, "running a whorehouse?"

I blamed James.

I couldn't blame James for the consequences of a lads' day out at the Punchestown festival.

As a young man with an eye for the latest fashions I was delighted to be wearing a pair of tight cowboy boots. They looked very smart but were real ankle huggers, and as the

day and night went on they began hugging my ankles with an ever-increasing dedication to the cause. We ate a lot and drank even more that day, and by the end of it I was struggling to get the boots off.

All efforts to remove them came to nothing. My body had expanded within them and they seemed to have shrunk. In the end it was all too much like hard work. I pulled my trousers and pants off over the boots and, shameful as it is to admit, then got into bed and slept in them.

Very regrettably, I slept for longer than I should have done and duly failed to turn up for work. Dad, who knew where I had been the previous day, put two and two together and stormed into the house, up the stairs and into the bedroom.

What followed will stay with both

of us for ever. No parent should ever have to pull back the duvet of his son's bed to discover his own flesh and blood wearing nothing but a pair of cowboy boots.

My Dad suffered that fate.

Luckily, I was too bleary-eyed to catch the expression on his face but I did hear his reaction as he walked down the stairs to see Mam, who had come into the house to see what was going on.

"Eileen," he said, "I think we've raised a tramp!"

►►Richard Hughes will be at Newbury today signing copies of *A Weight Off My Mind*. There will also be a Q+A with Richard before racing at midday in the Champagne Hall

►►A *Weight off My Mind* is available from www.racingpost.com/shop at the special price of £15