

By ZOË SMITH

THE BIG INTERVIEW

Tim Stockdale

ZOË SMITH talks to Tim Stockdale about the highs and lows of his career, how attention to detail makes all the difference, and the horse that is a 'superstar in the making'

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A photograph of a rider on a white horse jumping over a blue fence. The horse is in mid-air, with its front legs tucked and back legs extended. The rider is wearing a dark jacket, white breeches, and a helmet. The background shows a blue sky with clouds and some greenery.

Tim riding Fresh Direct K2 at the Hickstead British Jumping Derby Meeting

When I ask Tim Stockdale what he considers the greatest achievement of his career, he doesn't hesitate: "Without any shadow of a doubt, it was winning the King George V Gold Cup". Tim claimed the title on Kalico Bay back in 2010 and it was a moment that held special significance. "I remember as a 12-year-old kid, looking down through the stairs – I'd been sent to bed, because it was late and the showjumping jump-off was on, and I sneaked down and was watching from the top step – watching Mike Saywell win the King George V Gold Cup and thinking 'Wow! I would love to do that one day'."

As "a kid on a hairy 13.2hh pony from Retford Market" it seemed improbable that Tim would not only go on to work for his childhood hero, Mike Saywell (an experience he describes as 'a great honour'), but to represent his country over 50 times at the Olympic Games, European Championships, World Equestrian Games, and Nations' Cup, and even be awarded the British Equestrian Federation's Medal of Honour. The sentiment isn't lost on Tim and today his King George V trophy has pride of place on the mantelpiece, serving not only as a talking piece for visitors, but as a reminder of the hard work and dedication that got him to the top.

Born to a working-class family in Worksop, Nottinghamshire, the road to the Olympics wasn't exactly paved out for him. His first pony, a little 12.2hh skewbald called Danny Boy, was bought for £50 with a saddle, bridle and rug, and started off living in the garden shed, while his dad built him a stable. But when I suggest that it might have been harder for him starting out with little money and a family that knew next-to-nothing about horses, Tim is quick to point out the positives instead.

"One aspect I definitely benefitted from was that I had to do it myself. If I didn't ride my ponies, nobody rode my ponies. And that was one of the rules – the day that the ponies didn't go out, they would be sold. My father would tell me 'We're not going to keep ponies to stay in a stable. That pony relies on you to feed him, water him, and to exercise him. Because he doesn't get a choice, so you need to do that, every day'." It's a message that's stayed with him ever since. "Even now, the rule is – unless there's a veterinary reason – no horse stays in the stable on a daily basis".

This discipline and dedication served him well, and Tim credits his strong work ethic for getting him to the top. "Any disadvantage that I might have had, I didn't know it at the time. And as a result, I was able to progress through the industry by the back door rather than the front door. "I left school at 15 and went to work at a yard for free to learn the ropes. I mucked out for six months before I even rode a horse. I'm afraid that's not seen so much in the younger generation. They come for job interviews at 16 in riding trousers that cost £100 and boots that cost £500 and they want to know how many horses they are going to be riding in a day. [I want to tell them] 'you probably won't be riding for a while because you've got some other stuff to learn first!'"

With an over 30-year career and a résumé that reads like a showjumper's bucket list, it's safe to say that Tim's humble beginnings didn't hinder him, but it has made him appreciate the benefits of a good pay cheque. After a couple of high-profile sales over the last few years – including selling his top horse

Fleur De L'Aube to Stal Tops for Jessica Springsteen to ride – he is excited at the opportunity to focus more on producing youngsters.

"Having a bit of financial security has meant a totally different approach from the business side of things. It gives you choices. I'm really enjoying producing the young horses without having to think to myself, the first person who comes around the corner and offers money, I should sell, because I can't afford to keep them." Later, when I ask him whether he ever gets chance to just go for a nice hack, he tells me: "Taking a nice 5-year-old and popping it round a Newcomers –that would be my equivalent of a hack!"

There's one horse in particular that stands out – Cacharel IV, a big seven-year-old mare. "She's one of the best horses I've ever ridden in my life" Tim tells me, and he seems genuinely excited by her potential. "I'm not in a hurry to sell her and [thanks to having a bit a financial security] I'm now in a situation where I can run her a

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“She's definitely one to watch, a superstar in the making.”



Photo courtesy of SEM Photographic

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 Tim riding Cacharel IV, a "superstar in the making!"

bit further up the ladder and maybe have one last go at it before I hang my boots up. She's had two fences down in the ring in her whole career! She's definitely one to watch, a superstar in the making."

Hearing Tim enthuse about Cacharel gives me chance to ask him what he looks for in a perfect showjumping horse. "He's got to be athletic in build, soft in his body, a little bit more lightweight than heavyweight type frame, ideally not too big or too small because courses are all based on related distances. Although, you'll always get exceptions – the 15.2hh or 18hh horse that's a superstar." But the type of horse that is successful today, Tim tells me, is a lot different to when he first started out. "It used to be about power or scope, but now they have to be careful. If he's not careful, he's not going to win."

It's a fact that goes hand-in-hand with the evolution of the sport and Tim admits that the sport as a whole "is far more sophisticated [today]. The level of riding, the level of balance that is required between horse and rider, the technicality of the courses, and the horse power required. The times have got tighter, the courses have got more technical and delicate, and horses have to be faster as competitions are much more 'against the clock' with far smaller margins. In the olden days, it was more about jumping clear rounds."

Chatting to Tim, there's no doubt that he's a sportsman through and through, but unlike those who might be sentimental for the 'golden days', he's passionate about moving the sport forward and keen to point out how advances in technology, data analysis, and fitness monitoring have enabled all sports to progress. He enthuses about how performance analysis has taken fielding in cricket to a new level (*I admit to getting a bit lost in all the cricketing jargon at this point!*) and how British Dressage (*OK, now I'm following again!*) has shone a light on the importance of rider fitness, biomechanics, and accuracy. "Eventing, showjumping, dressage, racing... they've all gone to the next level and there's just so much more attention to detail."

It's the attention to detail that can make all the difference and Tim practices what he preaches. "We keep logs for all our horses and it's amazing how many times you see a pattern emerge. For example, I had one horse who would always have fence 3 or 4 down, so analysed what he did and realised that when he went in the ring, he was a little bit tense. I felt him jump one, two, and after three, he would sigh, breathe out and relax a bit [which is when he would >>

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>> have a fence down]. So, I made sure to always go in the ring a bit earlier with him and allow him that bit of extra time. His clear rounds went up by 30% straight away, just by doing that. But I would never have realised if I hadn't kept the log.

"I also had a mare [that I noticed] had more success in June, July and August, than March, April and May, and I worked out that when she was coming into season, she just wasn't at her peak. There are other ones that just jump better on sand than grass, and you see that they don't win much on grass, but they always win money on a surface.

The act of writing it down, it makes you think 'I'm sure I've written that down before' and a pattern emerges. It's not rocket science, but common sense is a valuable part of what we do. And the horses give us a lot of information that sometimes we're not listening to. It's not that they're not telling us something, but that we're not listening."

Listening to our horses is a familiar concept to IH members and I can't resist asking Tim if he's ever seen Monty in action. "I have been to a Monty Roberts demo and I'm a big fan of him. He's got a good way with words, he's a good storyteller, he's very emotive, and he's been instrumental in bringing that aspect of equestrianism [to the masses]. I have a lot of respect for him."

An awareness and understanding of horse psychology and 'what makes your horse tick' can also reap dividends in the showjumping ring. Tim agrees: "I actually say to people that it's important that you muck out your horses or that you are involved with your horses on a closer basis, because then you understand what type of character they are. What is their modus operandi? For example, do they get better the more that you ask of them? I don't mean forcing them, but actually some horses are better when you put them under a little bit of pressure, they rise to the occasion, while other horses get worse. The type of horse and their character is important to be aware of."

Of course, not everything can be planned and accounted for, and for all the successes that Tim has notched up, he's also been through some low points. Just a year before his King George win, Tim's Olympic mount, Fresh Direct Corlato, sustained a career-ending injury at the Nations Cup in Calgary, which was a "big blow". But the worst was yet to come and in 2011, he found himself lying in a hospital bed, having sustained fractures to three vertebrae in his neck during a fluke accident when trying out a young horse.

"Breaking my neck wasn't great, I'm not going to lie to you!" Tim recounts with characteristic good humour, but he is also candid about the prospect of not being able to ride again. "For the first week, that was dreadful. I don't remember a huge

amount, because I was well drugged up and I was still coming to terms with it, but we didn't know whether there were going to be lasting neurological problems or if I would ride again". Thankfully, the prognosis was good and he transcended all expectations to be back competing within six months of the accident. Did coming so close to losing it all, change his approach? "It made me realise I'm not invincible," he admits, but he's not one for regrets, adding, "I could look back thinking 'I shouldn't have done this, shouldn't have done that' but I didn't really see it coming. When you look

around, you soon stop feeling sorry for yourself, as you start to realise that so many [top riders] have faced similar setbacks. You just have to get stuck in and get going again.

"It did make me appreciate that there is a bigger picture out there. It sounds a bit corny, but there is. We sometimes get hung up on a horse having one fence down or that a deal's gone wrong, or that something's not quite happened as we wanted it to, but in the grand scheme of things, these are all very small bumps in the road. There are a lot of things that are a lot more important. If I have a jump down, I don't get home and it's on the news: 'the prime minister's ordered an enquiry because Tim Stockdale's knocked a jump down today!' We sometimes do get hung up about how important it all is. So, I think it made me appreciate that."

These days, it seems like Tim has got the balance right. He's a dedicated family man – "my two kids are the best thing that's ever happened to me and every day they make me proud" – and his wife, Laura, has been an integral part of his success, both personally and professionally. While Laura manages their home yard at Dovecote Farm in Northamptonshire, both boys seem to have inherited a love for sports, with Joseph, 18, gaining success in showjumping as well as cricket, and Mark, 14, playing county golf.

Tim is also appreciative of the lifestyle his success has afforded him – "I feel very fortunate [to do what I do]. I could have a 'real job', where I'm sat in front of a computer screen all day!". But at 53 years old, he's not ready to hang up his boots just yet. "At the end of the day, I've had a very good career and it's certainly not finished yet, but at the same time, I'm on what I like to call

the 'lap of honour'! I'm on the last lap of my career. I don't see myself doing it until I'm 60, I don't see myself being another John Whittaker, but I do see myself doing it for another couple of years."

So, we're not going to see you in Tokyo for the next Olympics, I hint? "I think my Olympic days are probably ended!" he admits, but, ever the sportsman, he can't help thinking about the next big thing. "In Cacharel, I have a really great project. I'm really, really looking forward to producing her to grand prix level and whether it's with me or whether it's with someone else, we'll have to see...". And I can't help thinking we *will* be seeing a lot more of Tim in the years to come. 

“I'm on what I like to call the 'lap of honour'!”



Photo courtesy of Tim Stockdale



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Top: Tim on his Olympic ride Fresh Direct Corlato. Bottom: Tim's sons – Mark (left) plays County Golf and Joseph (right) is a cricketer and successful showjumper

SOME WISE WORDS FROM TIM!

“You never stop making mistakes and the truth is you should never be afraid of making mistakes, because whenever you're doing something, there's an opportunity that it might not go right. It's how you react in that situation that is important. The man that never makes a mistake, never gets out of a chair!”

“...horses give us a lot of information that sometimes we’re not listening to. It’s not that they’re not telling us something, but that we’re not listening.”

showjumper and

TIM'S TOP THREE THINGS ALL RIDERS SHOULD AIM FOR...

1 BALANCE: “The balance between horse and rider [is crucial] and both horse and rider need to be fit for purpose.”

2 CONTROL: “It’s about communication and compliancy, horse and rider working together. You can’t always allow a horse to do it his own way, because the course is set and it’s a challenge that is designed to be fair for all. But you should always be trying to get the horse to work with you.”

3 SOFTNESS: “If I’m going to criticise riders today a little bit, I think there’s a lot of big bridles and a lot of big spurs. I’d like to see a little bit more training and softness, but not forced softness, from the horses.”

Taking home the King George V cup on Kalico Bay in 2010