



MARK JOHNSON - A REAL 'LIFETIME RACECALLER'

By Geir Stabell

When the horses get under way in next year's *Run for The Roses*, the voice ready to describe the action may be that of Englishman *Mark Johnson*, who is guest announcer at the prestigious track this week. In an attempt at landing the job and become the new "voice of the Kentucky Derby".

He may come from across the pond but Johnson is probably the one of five applicants for this job literally with a *lifelong* experience in racecalling.

Believe it or not, this man has been commentating on horse races since he was "about three years old".

And, before you ask, no; that was not a couple of years ago. Johnson (42) laughs himself when reflecting on how he took his first steps towards what has become an international career in racecalling. He has called the Epsom Derby in England five times and was the voice of the St. Leger – the world's oldest classic race – 11 for consecutive years. "My first classic race was when Frankie Dettori won the St. Leger on *Classic Cliché*, which was his 1000th winner", he recalls, "and I got luck with my five years of doing the Derby, as they included outstanding horses like *High Chaparral*, *Galileo* and *Sinndar*".

Johnson also mentions calling one of *Best Mate's* wins in the Cheltenham Gold Cup as a highlight. That may well have been a high point in his 21-year career with a microphone and a pair of binoculars up to now, but if he finds himself in the commentator's box at Churchill Downs on the first Saturday of May, Johnson will be hard pressed not to call that day *the* highlight of his long and ever expanding career.

More than any other announcer, Johnson is an all-round race caller. Back home in England, he has described the action of all sorts of races, from amateur jump racing, so-called point-to-points, to Arab racing, top class flat racing, top class steeplechases, and he has also previously called races in the USA, at Calder and Suffolk Downs, and also had guest appearances in Barbados.

A QUICK AND EAGER STARTER

In racing terminology, Mark would be best described as one that was quick out of the gates.

"I was only three when I began using my toy horses for races on the dining table, and called the action of my imaginary races", he says. Johnson is from Skegness, on the coast in Lincolnshire, not far from Market Rasen racecourse. "That is where I grew up, in a family with

no ties to horseracing. I persuaded my parents to take me to see the 'gee-gees' at a racecourse, so off we went".

"When I was still very small we visited friends who had a chess-set. I went up to the set, removed all pieces except for the horses, and played races while giving running commentary.

"Later on, my hobby was to watch the races on TV on Saturdays, with the sound turned down, and do my own commentaries, while at the same time eating my fished fingers and peas of course. Remember, this was in the days of black and white, so it was a bit more challenging than collecting stamps! I probably commentated on my first Grand National when I was six. It became an obsession, and I am like the boy who wanted to be an astronaut and went to the moon. This is what I always wanted to do. "

Johnson soon started sending off his tapes trying to get a job, but for some time it was "dead men's shoes" as he calls it, but when he had just turned 20 he got his first job.

"I was in my second year at King Alfred's College in Winchester, where I was taking my degree in TV, film and theatre. I specialized in outside broadcasting and wrote my paper on that subject, and within that was coverage of the Grand National."

Johnson was often told that he came 'from the wrong side of the fence, with his northern accent' but eventually, Philip Schouller gave him a chance at the Twesledown Club point-to-point meetings.

"Schouller, who was half Greek, had just taken over in charge at Twesledown, and he wanted to give locals a chance. He appointed a new starter, new stewards and so on, and he decided to give me a go. He must have wondered when I turned up for my interview, as at the time I had the part as a Spanish conquistador in a play, so I had grown a full beard and it was not meant to be well trimmed. I must have looked a right student, but I got the job".

That was in the spring of 1987. By coincidence, Mark soon had a second break; "One weekend, a big race meeting was cancelled so the point-to-point meeting had a bigger crowd. I was being noticed by people who would normally never have heard me call races. I started getting some more jobs, but of course in those days I had no car, so it meant that my mum and dad would come down at weekends to take me to the meetings."

Johnson was still commentating solely on point-to-point meetings, and the next step towards bigger arenas like Epsom Downs and Aintree was when he was offered jobs at meetings for Arab horses. "It was totally by fluke", he recalls, "there was some Arab racing at Market Rasen and I went along to see what it was like. The guy who was calling the races, let me do a race. Their next meeting was at Kempton Park, where I was asked to do two races, and eventually I was offered the job of doing most Arab races." Mark's voice was heard regularly at these meetings for 15 years. "It got me onto bigger racecourses", he explains, "and that is where you want to be to make a career in this job".

The next important step did come via point-to-points, however, as Aintree's clerk of the course was also in charge of point-to-point meetings, where Mark was the commentator. He was now closing in on a much more important arena;

"Prior to the 1990 Grand National meeting I received a letter, out of the blue, from Aintree, explaining that the course executive had decided to give young talents a chance at the big meeting. I was fortunate enough to be one of them, and I called a race at the National meeting. "

The Grand National itself, run over four and a half miles over 30 fences, poses some challenge for racecourses and broadcasters alike, as it cannot be covered by one commentator. The course assigns two commentators for the world famous chase, while radio and TV commentary is normally covered by four.

Johnson came onto one of the biggest stages in racing in 1990 and a few years later he commentated on the Grand National. Which is very different from calling a two-turn mile race with eight runners at Churchill Downs.

“From the commentary box, you only see about half the field when they start, so nearly 20 horses are hidden until they jump the first fence”, he explains. “I said after I had done my first National that, seeing all these horses jump towards me, I felt that I knew what General Custer must have felt like when the indians attacked at Little Big Horn.”



Mark Johnson at work – English race callers work both with binoculars and a TV-monitor. At some courses the home stretch is between a mile a 1 ¼ miles!

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When the TV-channel At The Races started showing American racing in the evenings, Johnson was soon in the running for some TV work too, as his interest in US racing made him an ideal candidate. “That is how I got some work at Calder in Florida”, he explains, “as I was over in America, and flew via Miami, so I sent off an email to Calder explaining who I was and what I did, and that I would just love it if they would let me come in and call a race at their meeting. They did, I called a few races, and I have now been going back to Calder for about nine years. Last year, their announcer Bobby Newman had to go away for a week and they contacted me from Calder to offer me the job as what they call “the alternate announcer”.

TREATING HIS JOB LIKE A SPORT

Preparation is crucial in a job like racecourse commentating. The other factor of great importance is passion for the sport. Johnson clearly has both these things in place, and tells us that he treats his job like a sport. For instance, he never eats anything two hours before a race meeting, as he believes feeling ‘light not heavy’ is an advantage, and his preparations must take hours. He sits down and draws in the colours of the silks of each and every horse in all races before a meeting – to make sure he will remember them all. At the busy meetings that can mean up to 100 horses.

“It is homework, homework, homework”, he says, “and what I try to do is find something, it could be anything, to identify each horse, like blinkers, bandages, big white blazes and so on. You do have to have an incredible short-term memory. I call myself a ‘human toilet’ as I fill my head with all the information I can get in there, then after the race I flush it out, to make room for the next event coming up.”



“Homework, homework, homework”...

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Does a racecourse commentator bet?

“I normally don’t when I am working”, Johnson answers, “not because I would not be allowed to, but because it will distract you, it will be too easy to focus on one horse. I do bet, but mostly on days when I am not commentating. Another thing is that a commentator should call every winner in an exciting way, as if he has backed the horse”.

Johhson does regular voice exercises every day, as he says; “because if you lose your voice, you lose your voice... something that must not happen.”

If he has a week off he does not have a week off, one could say, as he then watches a few races on TV with the sound turned down and calls the races, just to get practice. Before travelling out to Kentucky to do his days as the guest announcer at Churchill Downs, he called several races from the track at his home in London, while watching them online. From Wednesday, he is the voice of Churchill Downs and will be calling the action at the last four days of the meeting. This being Thanksgiving weekend, Johnson will have the pleasure of calling some very valuable stakes races, with some of the best horses in America, over these four days. Calling top class races is easier than when you are given fields of mainly ‘bread and butter runners’. Most of the horses will be well known, and some of the fields not too big, so Mark did enjoy the luck of the draw when the days were allocated to five commenators who are competing for this job. Then again, on Saturday, Churchill Downs stage a 12-race card of only two-year-old races, with almost exclusively new names. That can’t be easy to deal with.

“I am fully aware of the Saturday card”, Mark comments, “with juveniles only, but that’s fine, I love watching young horses early in their careers and, you know, if there are some future stars on show, I’ll be one of the first to know”, he says with a smile that clearly reveals one of his big assets in this job. That there is still more than a little bit left of that energetic little boy who did away with kings, queens and bishops on the chess board, to make space for some more exciting action – with his favourites pieces, the knights, the horses.