

Frankie

The Autobiography of Frankie Dettori



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of Frankie Dettori**

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Irresistible to the punters, champion jockey Frankie Dettori is a charismatic personality with an easy charm and immaculate dress sense that make him an instant favourite on the track and a household name off it. His autobiography has been fully updated to include Frankie's record-breaking racing exploits in 2004. In his own words, Frankie Dettori charts his rise from stable lad to champion jockey, revealing the endless hours of hard work, the fun along the way, and his determination to succeed against the odds. Frankie relives his nine Classic winners in the UK and talks about his notable victories at the St Leger, The Breeder's Cup Mile, the Arc de Triomphe, the Queen Elizabeth II Stakes, and, memorably, his seven winners on the same card at Ascot in 1996. He also shares the secrets of his successful partnerships with trainers like Luca Cumani and John Gosden, and owners such as Sheikh Mohammed of the Goldolphin organisation. This is also a human interest story. Frankie talks openly about using drugs to keep his weight down, his celebrity role as team captain on 'A Question of Sport', his rich and varied lifestyle outside of racing, including his family and inner circle, and of the moment when he almost lost his life following a plane crash. Controversial, informative and hugely entertaining, Frankie Dettori's life story will appeal to the millions of people who follow the sport as well as those intrigued to know more about one of the greatest talents that horse-racing has ever seen.

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Frankie

The Autobiography of
FRANKIE DETTORI with JONATHAN POWELL



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To my dad Gianfranco who never doubted that I would make it as a jockey, even when I was not sure. A thousand thanks.

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One I Knew I Was Going to Die

Death came calling with terrifying suddenness on a bleak summer's day in 2000. It happened as Ray Cochrane and I were taking off in a small plane from Newmarket racecourse on the sort of routine flight to the races that had been part of my daily schedule for the past fifteen years.

One moment we were sitting side by side in the rear seats as our Piper Seneca bumped alarmingly along the grass runway on that wet and windy June morning. The next I knew with horrible certainty that I was about to die as our little plane, fatally damaged on take-off, struggled to reach a height of perhaps 100 feet before plunging towards Devil's Dyke, a huge ancient bank and ditch that lies between the July track and the main course at Newmarket.

White smoke was already streaming from a crippled engine, and there were the first signs of flickering flames as our doomed aircraft tilted crazily onto its right side, hampered from the lack of full power when we needed it most. In front of us our pilot Patrick Mackey was fighting manfully at the controls to keep us in the air long enough to avoid the dyke on our way down, but his task was impossible from the moment the right-wing engine propeller gouged into the ground just before lift-off.

Not too many people in full health know beyond doubt that they have only a few seconds to live. Ray was icy calm as we waited for the impact that would end it all. Next to him I wasn't so controlled. 'We're going to die mate, we've had it!' I screamed.

So many people have asked me what it was like to stare death in the face. It's impossible to explain because it all seemed to happen so quickly. I was certain that it was all over, finished, as if somebody had pressed a button to end my life. I was also terrified that it was going to hurt like hell, but my main feeling was one of disappointment at the waste of it all, that I would never see my wife Catherine and little boy Leo again.

The left wing tip was just about vertically above the other wing as we dived towards the bank and the ground rushed up to meet us. If we'd crashed nose first onto the dyke we would all have been killed instantly, no question—smashed to pieces like flies on a car windscreen.

By some miracle Patrick nearly managed to clear the dyke—until the extreme tip of the right wing clipped the top of the bank. This sent us cartwheeling into the ground on the other side of the ditch. The noise of the impact seemed to last forever.

It was a nightmare sound I'll never forget.

At a time like this you have no control over your fate. If the plane had ended upside down we would all have been trapped in the wreckage and burned to death. There would have been no escape as more than sixty gallons of aviation fuel ignited. Even though we settled the right way up, the force of the impact left Ray unconscious for a few seconds, and I was out of it too.

When we came to our senses we were still strapped in our seats, with the passenger door on my left squashed in on top of me. No escape route there. In front of us poor Patrick was slumped unconscious over the controls, flames were coming from the engines and the horrible smell of fuel was overpowering. I was already aware of a dreadful pain in my right leg. There was also so much blood on my face from deep cuts on my forehead that I thought I'd been blinded. Ray immediately took charge, thank goodness, or I wouldn't be here to tell the tale.

Spotting that the tiny door used to stow baggage immediately behind my seat was ajar, he kicked the rest of it out, then squeezed forward again to undo my seat belt, dragged me backwards and pushed me out of the narrow opening. The drop onto the ground was probably no more than eighteen inches but I landed on my injured ankle and immediately began screaming from the pain, unable to move.

Lying in a heap near the remains of the tail plane, I was still far from safe.

Terrified that I could be trapped by the flames at any moment, I cried out to Ray for help as he was turning back to try to save Patrick. When he heard me he came back, pushed himself through the broken hatch and dragged me thirty yards or more to safety just as the fire was really starting to take hold.

Then he immediately rushed back determined to rescue Patrick, but by the time he reached the wreckage flames were beginning to appear underneath the plane. Ray should have given up at that point but he was unbelievably brave. Showing total disregard for his own safety, he forced open the pilot's door on the right-hand side, leaned in, reached towards Patrick and was just about to release his belt when there was a whoosh and the whole lot went up.

Driven back by the ferocity of the inferno and already suffering from burns, Ray then struggled round to the other side of the plane to have another go through the hatch that had provided our escape. By now the first rescuer had appeared, a racecourse worker, who was begging Ray at the top of his voice to get away from the flames, yet still he persisted.

The last image I have of this incredible rescue attempt was of Ray taking off his jacket and trying to use it to beat out the flames, then collapsing in tears of rage, overcome with guilt at being unable to save Patrick, before crawling over to comfort me.

We lay huddled together in an advanced state of shock, like two small refugees silhouetted by the fire. Then the cavalry began to arrive. Soon we were both trussed up and on our way by helicopter to Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge. The last thing we wanted after our ordeal was to be flying again so soon, but we were in no condition to argue.

As we lay in emergency, shocked, hurting and distressed, neither of us knew quite how badly we were injured. I remember thinking: Why go on as a jockey? What's the point? I had a lovely wife and a bouncy little son. There was so much more to life than racing. Why not jump off the treadmill and take things easy for a change?

Then I began to realise that God had saved me. I was going to die and he spared me. Why? Obviously it wasn't my time. And because my life almost ended far too soon, I decided there and then that I was going to make the most of it the second time around.

Two Against the Odds

As a small boy I wanted to be a petrol pump attendant when I grew up. Well, the price of petrol was very high then. It seemed like a rewarding career. Later I fancied myself as a professional footballer, but it was my destiny to become a jockey. My dad Gianfranco was champion jockey thirteen times in Italy and also won lots of big races in England, but he didn't sit on a horse until he was twenty and stumbled into racing by chance after he left the family home in Sardinia to seek fame and fortune on the mainland.

His father Mario, my grandfather, had an iron will. He stood little more than 5ft 2in tall and came from a family who were often penniless. He was a man's man—tough, stubborn, hard as nails—and could be an absolute bastard. We all called him Super Mario and you will soon understand why. He was doing odd building jobs, earning money where he could—sometimes in the mines at Carbonia—when Italy became involved in the Second World War in June 1941 as an ally of Germany.

Soon the Germans were everywhere in Sardinia with several army barracks, but at least there was no fighting on the island. Once my grandfather joined the Italian Army he was based full-time in barracks, which was a bit of a problem because his wife Apollonia lived thirty miles away from the camp. He used to tell me stories of how he cycled over to see her whenever he was free. Since the tyres on the bicycle were old and worn, his journey would often be interrupted by punctures which he mended with the crudest of equipment.

Mario's love for my grandmother cost him dear. When he failed to return to camp in time one Monday morning he was put on a charge and locked in a cell for a month. The second time it happened they tied him to a pole in the middle of a courtyard and left him there for several days, maybe a week. Ants creeping all over his body made him so itchy that they nearly drove him mad. In desperation he shook the pole so hard that it broke and came crashing down and he was put in a cell once more. You might think that he had learned his lesson by then, but the Dettoris are resolute in matters of the heart. Once he'd completed his sentence he rushed off for a reunion with my grandmother and failed to return to barracks before the curfew yet again.

This time there was no escaping serious punishment. Mario was immediately sent to the front at Montecassino early in 1944, where one of the fiercest battles of the war was raging around the famous monastery—which was eventually destroyed by Allied bombers after months of heavy fighting. It came at the point in the war when the Allies were trying to drive the Germans out of Italy. Casualties were horribly high in the battle for Montecassino, south of Rome. It was a bloodbath. Mario told me he spent six months crouching in the trenches there and escaped with no more than a small scratch on his arm from a stray bullet.

The way he told it to me years later, rain fell for weeks on end and the only way he managed to keep himself from sinking into the mud at night was by sleeping on a lilo in the trenches. He smoked incessantly, and quickly learned never to put his head above the parapet—for the very good reason that those who did immediately came under fire, often with fatal results.

Once Italy was liberated by the Allies, Mario returned home to Sardinia and started working in the local mines at Carbonia which supplied coal for much of the mainland. Since he was a builder he had the perilous job of erecting a barrier with bricks and cement at great speed to stop fire spreading whenever it broke out. This required great skill and courage because he was obviously the last man out when a fire started. Mining was much more primitive then and he saved quite a few lives.

My grandparents had six children, all boys, but one died at birth. Pepe was the oldest followed by Gianfranco, Salvatore, Sandro, and finally Sergio. Eventually Mario left the mines and began his own building business, though there were months at a time when he was unemployed. As the boys grew up and left school they all began working for him. My dad remained at school until he was sixteen, which was like going to university in those days in such a poor community.

My dad was pretty cute and soon realised there was more to life than toiling away for his father for ten hours or more a day, mixing cement for the modest reward of just a bowl of pasta with beans and a roof over his head. After months of hard labour he couldn't see any sort of future. So, one day, with huge blisters on his hands, he hurled his bucket and shovel into a well and informed my grandfather that he was leaving home. Mario's response was typical: as my dad walked away he heard Mario shouting that he needn't bother to return.

Gianfranco just about had the price of a ticket for the ferry that took him to the mainland. He headed for Rome and stayed with one of his brothers until he found a job washing plates in a restaurant. Soon he moved on to a second restaurant where he lived in the cellar with his sparse belongings. These he kept on a shelf to avoid the attention of rats. When it poured with rain one night, the cellar flooded and everything he owned was swept away.

Dad was left with nothing, but you are resilient at that age and all he cared about at the time was chasing the girls and smoking cigarettes. He was just exploring life and worked like hell to pay for his fun. He switched from washing dishes to selling fruit and veg at a market stall. This also involved making home deliveries, a job that offered unexpectedly exciting perks from some of the housewives he met on his daily rounds.

My dad was smart, had a bit of charm and an easy smile. He was hungry for life and kept moving on, looking for a break. One of the stall holders was a policeman who also owned three trotting horses, stabled at Tor di Valle racecourse in Rome. Soon Dad began looking after these three horses, even though at first, he didn't have a clue what to do with them. He learned by asking and watching other lads at nearby stables, and within a week he was quite efficient at attaching the horses to the sulky, which is the little chariot used in trotting. He was also feeding the horses and mucking them out twice a day, throwing out the manure, adding fresh straw, and brushing around their stables.

He did this all by himself in return for an unlimited supply of cigarettes, as many packs as he could puff his way through. He was small, stocky, extremely fit and bright enough to realise that there wasn't much money in looking after trotting horses. Some friends suggested he switch to the Capannelle, then the home of Italian horse racing. So he turned up there, offered his services to the first trainer he met, and at the age of eighteen signed up as an apprentice for five years—even though he'd never sat on a horse in his life. It was the start of an odyssey that would make him the most successful jockey in the history of Italian racing.

In those days an apprentice in racing was not much more than a slave, expected to do all the hard, dirty, dangerous and menial jobs for minimal reward. In the first few months he toiled away, cleaning out stables, sweeping the yard, and feeding the horses without so much as climbing onto their backs. The opportunity he craved came in the most unlikely circumstances. The adjoining stable at the Capannelle housed a lunatic racehorse called Prince Paddy. My dad says it was so mad that no-one dared go near it. The only way they could brush its coat with any degree of safety was with a long-handled broom. When the man who trained and looked after this crazy horse became ill with flu, no-one wanted to risk handling the beast in his absence.

That's where my dad stepped in. He must have been mad too, because in addition to grooming Prince Paddy he decided to ride him at exercise. Young, fearless, and frustrated at the way things were turning out, he ended up begging to ride the one horse in the place that terrified everyone who came near it. People at the track feared the worst when he led the beast out of the stable and jumped onto its back. They all assumed it would be only a matter of time before my dad was sent crashing to the ground. Instead the pair hacked round together at a gentle pace as though they'd done it a thousand times before. It was the same when they teamed up again the next morning.

So that was how my dad started in racing. Eventually he partnered Prince Paddy every day, got his licence and rode the horse in his first race. To general amazement they won. My dad had experienced a very tough upbringing and believes the hunger and anger inside fired his ambition. By the time he reached twenty-one he had managed only five winners, three of them on Prince Paddy

—yet within four years he was champion of Italy. Once he got there he was never going to throw it away. He was the best. No question.

Three of his brothers followed him into racing. Sergio became a very successful jockey too, with upwards of 1,500 winners and still rides a little bit while concentrating on his new career as a trainer. Sandro was also a jockey and is still involved as head lad to a trainer in Pisa. Pepe worked for years as a groundsman for the Italian Jockey Club. Salvatore was the outrageous one of the family. I don't recall ever meeting him—which is a shame because everyone says he was a lovely bloke. He was strong as an ox but never really channelled his energy in the right direction. Instead he became an alcoholic and died in 1996 when he choked on his own vomit.

As a young jockey my dad was so disciplined that he was in bed at nine every evening, his jodhpurs laid out nearby without a single crease in them, ready for an early start in the morning. You could say he was single-minded to the point of obsession, and who could blame him. For years he'd been toiling away in filthy jobs for meagre reward, and unlike a lot of young jockeys with easy money in their pockets he wasn't in a hurry to throw it all away.

It was the time of Molvedo, who followed in the hoofbeats of the mighty Ribot a few years earlier by winning Europe's greatest race, the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe, for Italy. Initially Dad was second jockey to Ribot's rider Enrico Camici. He learned much from Camici, but when he became champion he forged a strong alliance with the trainer Sergio Cumani in Milan—which, by then, was becoming the centre of Italian racing.

My parents married after a whirlwind romance that began when my father visited a travelling circus in Milan. His Saturday nights were spent with his friends either at the cinema or at the Circo Russo—which stretched to a pair of camels, a few monkeys, three or four lions and a resident clown. That evening he chose the circus, chiefly because it was next to the racecourse, and was immediately captivated by a gorgeous young girl in the ring with long black hair all the way down to her calves. She had a variety of roles that evening, including trapeze artist, contortionist, juggler and balancing athletically on the backs of two horses, one leg on each, with reins in her hands as they cantered side by side around the tight circus ring. She was also tied to a rotating wheel of fortune while some idiot wearing a headband threw knives at her!

Sitting in the front row, smartly turned out in a suit and tie, his brand new Vespa parked outside the big top, my dad couldn't take his eyes off this girl. For him it was a case of love at first sight. My mother's name is Iris Maria, but everyone calls her Mara. She was only sixteen that fateful night, like a rose about to bloom, and Dad made a point of meeting her afterwards. She had spent her entire life on the move with the rest of the family in the circus which originally came from Russia. They lived like a travelling band of gypsies. My dad pursued her relentlessly, swept her off her feet, and they were married a few short months later in 1963.

They were like two pigeons cooing at each other for sure. Theirs was a grand passion, but it was not an easy marriage because my mum had only known life on the road with the circus. She hardly ever attended school because she was always moving on to the next venue. As a result she can hardly read or write. We never did discover the identity of her father, but my grandmother Secondina, who never married, was one of two sisters who suffered terrible injuries to their legs when a caravan toppled over onto them when they were young children. Her sister was called Terzilla and their elder brother Primo. They all lived a nomadic life, earning peanuts and living in caravans as the circus rolled on from town to town each week.

My uncle Claudio was the resident clown. With a big belly and white tee-shirt he's the spitting image of Onslow from the TV programme *Keeping Up Appearances*. Claudio was offered a house by his local council, but he was so used to life on the road that he turned it down to continue living in his own spartan caravan.

Once my parents married, my mother's days as a trapeze artist were over. She was totally fearless then, but now she can't bear to travel to England to see me because she's frightened of driving

through the Channel Tunnel and even more terrified of flying. It's got to the stage where she won't even go up an elevator in a department store. So I keep in touch by phone and try to visit her whenever I am in Italy.

My sister Alessandra (who we call Sandra) was born in 1965. I followed five years later. Dad wanted my name to be as similar as possible to his. At first he considered calling me Gianfranco too, but eventually decided that if I became a jockey then Gianfranco Dettori junior was too much of a mouthful. So Lanfranco it was, although everyone in England has been calling me Frankie for years. I've inherited my suppleness and athleticism from my mother—and, of course, the agility and balance to carry out my trademark flying dismount. From my dad came the drive and desire to make it to the top.

By the time I was born on 15 December 1970 my parents' marriage was virtually over. I learned much later that at the time of my birth my father was away riding that winter in Australia and he was already involved with Christine, who eventually became my stepmother. They had met that August when he was riding in Deauville. From the start she shared his ambition and he must have known that his marriage to my mother was coming to an end even before I was born.

One of the problems was that my mother hated horseracing. To her it is a stupid pastime. She is a lovely person, beautiful, though completely down to earth, and having given up the nomad's life she couldn't settle to domesticity. She never really understood what drove my father—and later me—to devote our lives to making horses run as fast as they possibly can. He would come home full of himself explaining that he'd won the big race, and she'd reply 'What race?' In those days it was important for him to have someone who could share and enjoy his achievements and my mum couldn't do that.

Nor did she appreciate the strict disciplines involving my father's weight, so he could never be sure his supper would be on the table each evening at 6.30 after a long day's work. My father was so single-minded in his pursuit of success that he became more and more well-known and eventually my mum was being left behind. She loved him for who he was, not for the fact that he was the most famous jockey in Italy. By becoming so successful he needed somebody to take him further, and perhaps my mum wasn't educated enough to take the next step with him. She preferred to retain her simple lifestyle as a housewife and couldn't cope with the fame that came with all his high-profile winners. I don't blame her for that. It's just the way she is.

The truth is that my parents probably married too early. They parted after six years and were quickly divorced. I don't really remember them being together at all. After the split Sandra and I stayed with our mother in Milan. Dad lived no more than half a mile away with Christine but we didn't see too much of him in the early days because he was so busy as a jockey. Then when I was five my parents had a summit meeting and decided that we should move in with him. It came down to economics. Mum felt he was much better placed to look after us and give us a decent start in life, but she made it clear she would always be there for us if we needed her.

The switch to living with my dad was tough for me, even tougher for my sister, and toughest of all for Christine. When you are so young you love your mother and it was only natural that we should hate the person who took her place. I wanted to hate Christine, and at first I did my best to make her life a misery. Looking back now I realise that I was totally unfair to her, yet I have to admit she brought me up brilliantly. I really respect what she did for me in the most trying circumstances.

I'm sure she made mistakes, too but it must be every woman's nightmare to have to take over two unfriendly children who are not your own. Poor Christine must have been biting her lip every minute of the day. She was unbelievably strict, but I understand now that she was teaching us the right way even though we didn't want to be told at that age—or in my case, at any age. It was: make your bed; clean your teeth; you must have a bath; get up when I tell you, blah, blah, blah. I might as well have been in the army. I had to be in bed early every night and my sister followed half an hour later. At least we had a break at the weekend when we went to stay with our mum. For me those were

precious visits because I could sleep in until lunchtime if I wanted and could do pretty much what I liked. Then it would be back to reality with Christine on Sunday evening.

It was even more distressing for Sandra who had lived with mum until she was eleven. I'm sure the breakdown of our parents' marriage affected her more than me. She didn't take kindly to being told by Christine what to do every minute of the day. She tried to fight the system and became quite rebellious—but she was usually the loser and would end up in tears as we went to bed in the little cottage next to Dad's house.

My mother eventually set up home with a cool guy called Salvatore. He was good looking, a bit of a hippy, and has always treated me like his own son. They are still together to this day. Mum doesn't miss the glamour of life with my dad one bit. Far from it. She's happily set in her ways, enjoys looking after Salvatore, and works as a cleaner for a wealthy family in Milan. She is a natural house woman, absolutely obsessed by dusting, cleaning, ironing and washing. In some ways she is a servant woman, born to be a slave to society because she is in her element doing these things. Every Monday she goes right round the house until everything is spotless. That makes her the happiest woman in the world.

Soon after I moved in with Dad and Christine, he took me off for a few riding lessons. It didn't appeal to me one bit, partly perhaps because I was so small. Ponies held no interest for me. I was always waking up early in the mornings and often Dad would find me playing in the dining room when he came down. Soon he bought me jodhpurs, boots and a riding jacket. Then came the first time he took me with him in the morning to the stables of Sergio Cumani, the trainer who provided him with hundreds of winners during their rewarding association.

Once the racehorses had been exercised the lads would sometimes lift me onto the back of one that was tired and just walking round the yard while it cooled off. Being so light I'd cling to the mane while one of the lads held my leg just in case. Sergio would move among the horses after exercise, feeding them lots of sugar lumps. So this was my first experience of riding racehorses.

I also had an early insight into the demands on international jockeys. In addition to riding in Italy and sometimes France, Dad began to make frequent trips to England and occasionally Ireland. This followed the decision by Carlo d'Alessio, a Roman lawyer for whom he rode in Italy, to keep a select team of horses at Newmarket with Henry Cecil—who would become champion trainer countless times in the years ahead.

This development followed the appointment of Luca Cumani, Sergio's son, as Cecil's assistant. Years later Luca would play a pivotal role in my development as a jockey. Sergio trained for d'Alessio in Italy and had been in charge of the two-year-old colt Bolkonski when his first year's campaign ended with an easy victory ridden by my dad in the Premio Tevere at Rome early in November 1974. That prompted d'Alessio to send the colt to Cecil. It proved to be an inspired decision even though Bolkonski was beaten on his debut in England in the Craven Stakes at Newmarket—often considered to be a trial for the 2,000 Guineas. Just over a fortnight later my dad rode him to victory at 33-1 in the Guineas, one of the five English Classics for three-year-olds that are the cornerstone of the racing calendar. Grundy, the horse he beat that day, went on to be one of the great horses of that decade.

My father's first Classic success in England was overshadowed by an ugly dispute over pay between the stable lads and trainers, which overflowed into bitter confrontation at Newmarket on Guineas' weekend. The night before the race some of the strikers stole a bulldozer, crashed it through a fence and damaged the track. On the day of the race striking lads formed a picket line while others joined forces at the start in an attempt to disrupt the Guineas. When the horses were almost all loaded in the stalls the strikers promptly sat down right across the course. A delay followed while police sought to restore order.

Eventually the runners formed a line just in front of the stalls and the starter let them go by waving a flag. My dad settled Bolkonski towards the rear of the pack before producing him with a timely run which gained the day by half a length over Grundy. Shortly after Bolkonski prevailed, Tom

Dickie, the lad who'd looked after the horse from January until he joined the dispute, was carried shoulder high in front of the grandstand by his fellow strikers under heavy police escort.

Bolkonski extended his year of excellence by winning at Royal Ascot and Glorious Goodwood for my father, before an unexpected defeat at Ascot in September. By then the combination of Cecil, d'Alessio and Dettori were convinced that they had another potential champion on their hands in Wollow, who won all four of his races as a two-year-old.

Dad ended 1975 as the champion jockey of Italy once more with the added bonus of fourteen winners from forty-two rides in England. He briefly toyed with the idea of basing himself in England for a season, but it was a bit late in his career to be making significant changes and his commitments in Italy prevented the idea ever getting off the ground. He has always regretted that lost chance to ride full-time against the best jockeys in this country. That thinking influenced his choice of England as the starting point for my own career as a jockey ten years later.

The spring of 1976 saw Wollow continuing the good work by landing the 2,000 Guineas for the Italian connection for the second year running. There was then a brief hiccup on my dad's first foray at Epsom Downs, the home of the English Derby. Hopes were high that Wollow could complete the Guineas-Derby double. He started a red-hot favourite at 11-10 but ran out of stamina in the final quarter mile and finished only fifth behind Lester Piggott on Empery. Dad gained a further Classic success on Pampapaul in the Irish 2,000 Guineas at the Curragh in May 1977, where he beat Lester on the future Derby winner The Minstrel by a short head.

Three Lost in My Father's Shadow

In the late 1970s my father was flying as a jockey. He was the undisputed champion of Italy and increasingly gaining recognition abroad, but to me he was little more than a ghost—a distant, cold, intimidating figure. Life was still pretty tough for the rest of us at the Dettori home in Milan. There were many weeks during the height of the season when I saw him perhaps once in seven days. Usually he left before I was up and returned long after I'd gone to bed, and twice a week he set off at dawn to ride in Rome.

Towards the end of each summer he would be so far ahead of the other jockeys in the battle for the championship that he'd take a short break from domestic racing with a holiday abroad, followed by a few engagements riding in international events around the world. Then he tended to go away for the winters.

I'd often stay with my Godmother, Teresa Colangeli, who acted as my second mum and looked after me in the winter when Dad was away. She was married to a trainer called Vincenzo. When he died fifteen years ago she took over the training licence and is still doing well with her team of horses in Varese. One of her owners, Giuseppe Molteni, is the most successful amateur rider in Italy—and probably the world—with close on a thousand winners. He won three races in a week as recently as February 2004, and still rides out every day at the age of 74. Teresa provided a refuge when I needed one most and was always generous with her time and support. I still speak to her when I can because she has played a big part in my life.

On the days that my father *was* around when I came home after school, he was a grim, forbidding figure. It was a bit like finding Roy Keane or Graeme Souness in your kitchen. At least he greeted me with a smile and a kiss, but after that he would pop upstairs to change into his shorts, come back down again, watch the news on television without saying a word, then retreat behind his newspaper for the rest of the evening as he studied the form for the next afternoon's card.

Conversation wasn't encouraged. If I suggested doing something, Christine's stock reply would be that he was racing the following day so please don't bother him. I can't say it upset me much because I was used to it. His riding always came first and you could see that he was a man with a mission. If things became tricky because I stepped out of line, Sandra did her best to protect me. If necessary she would lie for me, but he could be very rough with her. She was the one who bore the brunt of it. I can remember one incident when he made her kneel in a tray of salt which was an incredibly painful punishment. That kept me quiet for a while because I didn't fancy the same fate.

He was very wrong in the way he treated us as youngsters but he didn't know any different. That was how he'd been brought up too, so he was simply sticking to the same rules. Many years later he admitted to me that no-one taught him how to be a father. Now he is as nice as pie and we get on famously.

Most nights Sandra and I used to cry ourselves to sleep. My sister is very strong-willed and by the time she was fourteen she was determined to run away. She told me of her plans to escape back to mum. Sure enough, one day after school she didn't come home. When my dad realised what had happened he was furious and there was the most terrific row in the kitchen that night as I was going to bed. The upshot was that I was suddenly on my own with Dad and Christine. This proved to be the turning point in my life. In all my time at school Dad had never come to collect me at the end of the day, but the very next afternoon there he was leaning out of the driving seat of a horsebox near the school gates, waiting for me. I can still remember the excitement I felt the moment I spotted him. I dashed up to the lorry, climbed into the front seat and gave him a big kiss.

He promised me a big surprise and he wasn't kidding. We set off through the streets of Milan until we pulled up a few miles away beside a field that contained three ponies, two that were bay and a palomino. The choice was mine and I had no hesitation in picking the palomino with its white face,

mane and tail. For me it was love at first sight. We took the pony home and put her in a field with stabling belonging to a farmer barely a hundred yards from our house.

Looking back now, I think my sister's sudden departure acted like an electric shock on my father. He realised he'd lost his daughter and was frightened of losing me, too. So he bought the pony to keep me happy. It's funny how things work out in life. If my sister hadn't run away and my dad hadn't bought that pony called Silvia, I might never have become interested in racing. Up until that point I had hated racing, chiefly because I found it so boring. Instead I spent all my time playing football at school and in my spare time. Once I had the pony I had to start looking after it and soon I was taking all my mates from school to watch me riding it round the field pretending to be a jockey.

Having your own pony at the age of eight in a field close to the middle of Milan was quite a novelty in those days, a bit like keeping a tiger in the centre of London. Until then I hadn't enjoyed my brief skirmishes at riding school. I was as scared as hell, and hated it, perhaps because I was so small. I'd been overshadowed by my sister in whatever I did. She was the posh one, but when she left there was nobody else to lean on, so I had to grow up fast. Having my own pony certainly helped.

On a rare day off at home my dad took me out to the stables, tied up Silvia and demonstrated how to groom her properly and muck the stable out until it was spotless. He said he would only show me once. He brushed her coat, mane and tail, used a pitchfork to remove the dung in the box and replace it with fresh straw, banked it up around the walls, cleaned out the manger, brought in hay for her to eat, and filled the water bucket with fresh water. It was an impressive lesson from a master, for this had once been his daily task as a stable lad in Rome and would eventually become mine when I became an apprentice. It was fun in the summer, but once winter arrived looking after Silvia became a horrible chore. Working in the dark in freezing weather didn't appeal to me then and doesn't appeal to me now.

There were consolations. I would rush home from school, put on my jodhpurs and racing silks in the colours of Carlo d'Alessio, run out to the stables, saddle up Silvia and set off on her at a million miles an hour around the field. There was no question of grooming her first or cleaning out her droppings. That lesson from Dad had already been forgotten! All I wanted to do was ride like the wind with my knees under my chin. I never had any doubt that I would be a jockey.

I was barely nine when I rode in my first Derby at the San Siro track in Milan. Never mind that it was only a pony race—to me it felt like the greatest race on earth. I trained and practised for weeks on Silvia in the field at home, but on the big day I was horrified to discover that all the others ponies were giants compared to Silvia and all the other jockeys giants compared to me. The course for this Derby was laid out on the jumping track between the last two fences and probably stretched to less than half a mile. It seemed like a marathon to me and I was a nervous wreck as we formed a ragged line at the start.

There was no fairytale start to my career as a jockey, quite the opposite. It was a case of 'slowly away, then faded' for Silvia and her hapless rider. Once the starter's flag fell we were left behind and were tailed off throughout. To add insult to injury, when Silvia saw the crowd at the finishing line she dug in her toes and sent me sprawling into the water jump.

Despite that humbling setback, my days at school were largely spent dreaming of riding when lessons were over. I was quick at maths and liked geography. In those two subjects I was a furlong ahead of the rest of the class. But I was hopeless at history and my stumbling attempts at English were embarrassing. If only I'd paid more attention to my English teacher.

Silvia and I were inseparable for about a year but the novelty quickly wore off when she began to get the better of me. She was strong and increasingly wilful and there were too many times when I couldn't control her. She was taking advantage of me, knew every trick in the book, and soon there were days when I was too frightened to ride her. Our partnership came to a painfully abrupt end one afternoon when she ran off with me under a metal paddock rail. I grabbed the pole in an attempt to save myself, but it broke off in my hands and fell onto my chest as I hit the ground. I was in so

much pain I could hardly breathe. I thought my ribs were broken, and by the time I was on the way to hospital I'd decided riding was definitely not for me. My plans as a jockey were in tatters. Luckily Dad took the hint and promptly sold Silvia. After that I didn't go near a horse for a year.

As the smallest boy at school I was the obvious target for bullying, but I became quite adept at avoiding nasty incidents. Christine, who used to work in a bank, offered some sound advice when she suggested thinking my way out of tricky situations. I was dead sharp even then and much cleverer than the bullies, so I usually managed to work my way out of trouble when danger threatened. Somehow I could fiddle my way around confrontations. I didn't have that many scraps because I usually managed to sidestep when danger threatened. Nothing much has changed since then!

Despite my size, I played a mean game of football at school during the long lunch break which stretched to an hour and a half in the hot Italian sun most days. I was small, light and nippy on my feet and spent most of the time as a goal-hanger lurking near the penalty spot, trying to convert any chances that came my way—and was disappointed if I hadn't scored a hatful by the end of the game. If the final score was 23-17 then I'd sometimes be responsible for eight or ten of them. I saw myself as Roberto Bettega, who was a famous centre-forward for Juventus in the seventies.

Although we lived in Milan, I supported 'Juve'—based in Turin—from the moment an uncle gave me one of their shirts for Christmas. I wore it all the time, which was quite a brave thing to do if you lived in Milan. Naturally my first heroes were all giants of Juventus. Initially Roberto Bettega was my inspiration, but I switched my allegiance to Liam Brady when he moved from Arsenal in June 1980. Liam was outstanding in Italy and won two Italian championships with Juve.

A few years later, when I was working for Luca Cumani in Newmarket, I finally met Liam when he came to an open day at the yard. For once in my life I was speechless, hopelessly star-struck, yet he was keen to talk to me because I'd ridden a few winners by then. It was very strange. Liam loves his racing, and whenever I can get to an Arsenal game at Highbury—where he is now head of youth development—I give him a call and meet up with him. Michel Platini, who followed Liam to Juventus, was another of my early heroes.

In those days my pals and I used to climb over the gates into the San Siro stadium at around eleven in the morning, a good three hours before kick-off. We'd hide in the grandstand until people started coming through the turnstiles. That way we could watch the Milan games for free and the money we saved would be spent on tickets for the basketball. Alas, my dream of a football career moved rapidly downhill after a long summer's holiday when I was about twelve. By the time I returned to school everyone else had grown a foot and I seemed to have shrunk, so I used to get a right pasting when the big boys tackled me. Even so, the manager of the boys' team I played for at the weekends felt I deserved my turn as captain.

On the big day, the parents of all the other boys turned up to support them but as usual my father was off riding somewhere—and as Christine always accompanied him I was the only one there without family. It hurt at the time and, you know, I can already see the same thing happening with my son Leo when he starts to play competitively in a few years' time. Every Saturday and Sunday I have to work, too, so he will be missing his dad if he plays football at weekends.

A source of endless fun for me and my friends came at the races on the days we all pretended to be horses and staged our own sprints. Each racehorse carried a plastic number on its bridle in the paddock. These were often discarded before the competitors cantered to the start. We'd collect the numbers, attach them to the belts of our trousers and have our own series of races using branches torn from trees in the park as makeshift whips to whack our own legs.

After a year's break from ponies I started to get the old hunger back for riding once more. The spark for my renewed interest came from writing reports for the school magazine on the racing at Milan, which my dad tended to dominate. For a while at school I was like a racing reporter. I would go with him to the races at the weekend, have a flutter with my friends, then on the Monday morning I'd cut out the pictures of the finishes from the local paper and write my articles around

them. Sometimes I filled as many as six pages with photographs and reports. That was the limit of my endeavour in the classroom. Usually I let two fingers of dust grow on my school books while I sat at my desk dreaming about horses.

Those early trips to the races opened my eyes to the riches that racing offered. Once in a while my dad would take me with him to Rome on a long weekend. The drive from Milan could take up to five hours on the Saturday and we would then walk the track on Sunday morning. One day he pointed out Lester Piggott, who was already a legend with nine Derby winners. 'Look at him', said Dad. 'You could be just as successful if you work hard enough.' It was a lofty ambition and it made a big impression on me.

We were out on the course at Rome on the morning of the 1981 Italian Derby when we ran into a group of English jockeys, including a baby-faced teenager called Walter Swinburn. I was wearing a tee-shirt and short trousers and here was this young jockey who was all the rage looking hardly any older than me. Glint of Gold, trained by Ian Balding, won the Italian Derby that year, and just over three weeks later he finished a distant second in the Derby at Epsom to Shergar ridden by the same Walter Swinburn.

While Dad was busy riding through the afternoon my mates and I were betting on every race. The pocket money he gave me was usually spent on bets at the Tote window. Most of my pals then were sons of jockeys, too, but we never seemed to benefit from inside information and thought we'd done well if we were left with a few lire after the last race.

Soon I was back at riding school for more lessons. Although I felt a bit stronger and more confident than before, I was hardly prepared for the next step when I started riding out in the school holidays with Carlo d'Alessio's string of horses, which by then was trained by the two brothers Alduino and Giuseppe Botti following the death of Sergio Cumani. Most of the time, I was restricted to walking and trotting on the roads. If the horse I was on was due to canter or gallop, I'd be replaced by a professional work rider.

I already knew this was the life for me and was further encouraged by two memorable experiences at Milan races in 1983 when I was twelve. The first came on one of those special days when my dad took me into the jockeys' changing room with him and I found myself sitting next to Steve Cauthen—who was known as the Six Million Dollar Kid for his exploits in America before he moved to England in 1979.

Steve had flown over to ride the English raider Drumalis. I was still so short that when I sat beside him on the bench my feet didn't reach the floor, but I watched spellbound as this world-famous jockey proceeded to put on all sorts of fancy riding equipment. You name it, he wore it. He had leggings and ankle protectors inside his riding boots, specially designed socks, and a whip with feathers on the end. My eyes never left him as he changed into his silks. I was fascinated by every little detail and it was only when he walked out to the paddock that I spotted a pair of red sponge ankle pads.

The temptation was irresistible. One minute they were there on the ground beside his bag, the next they were in my pocket. My dad, riding Bold Run for Alduino Botti, then inflicted further pain on Steve by beating him on Drumalis by a nose, but by the time he came back to 'weigh in' I'd left the scene of the crime. Four years later I'd just begun riding in England when Steve spotted me wearing his distinctive red ankle pads. 'Those are mine, you thieving little Italian bastard. Give them back', he demanded in menacing tones. I tried to bluster my way out of trouble but was eventually forced to plead guilty as charged. It was typical of Steve that he forgave me pretty quickly and soon became a great friend by giving me lifts to numerous race meetings in his chauffeur-driven Jaguar.

Four months after nicking Steve's precious ankle pads I was back at Milan with my dad, walking the course as usual, when a big helicopter flew over us and landed close by. Nobody had ever seen a helicopter at a race meeting in Italy before then. For me at such an impressionable age, it was like witnessing a spaceship drop out of the skies. Moments after the door opened the pale figure of Lester

Piggott appeared at the top of the steps, followed by the trainer John Dunlop and others associated with Sheikh Mohammed, a member of the Royal family in Dubai who were just beginning to expand their already considerable racing interests. Dad explained that the Sheikh owned the filly Awaasif who'd been sent from England to run in the Gran Premio Del Jockey Club. She won it easily, too, by six lengths. How strange to think that within a few short years I'd often be travelling in a similar helicopter to the four corners of the world to ride for Sheikh Mohammed.

By now I was totally addicted to racing, mad keen to become a jockey and was finding my last year at school increasingly tedious. I became totally obsessed with the idea of following in my dad's hoofbeats and couldn't see any point in remaining in the classroom a second longer. It helped that my dad shared my ambition and finally allowed me to leave school in the summer of 1984 at the age of thirteen and a half.

In a rare heart-to-heart, he had the sense to tell me that the years ahead would test my resolve to the limit. He explained that for every small boy who sets out to become a jockey only one in a thousand succeeds in making the grade. In the back of his mind, and that of Christine—who by then had become my stepmother—was the suspicion that I lacked the necessary motivation and aggression to make the breakthrough.

It is fair to say that in their presence I tended to be quiet, almost meek. That was because I felt intimidated by them. Away from home there were plenty of people to testify that I was almost too exuberant, and at school I was known as the naughtiest boy in the class.

Despite Dad's well-intentioned warning, I had no doubt that I would become a jockey, too, as I set off to work full-time in a racing yard for Alduino and Giuseppe Botti at the princely wage of around £10 a week. It quickly proved to be a disheartening experience, basically because at well under five stone I wasn't strong enough or experienced enough to ride big, hard-pulling thoroughbreds.

I hope I didn't behave too much like a spoiled brat, but that was probably the impression I gave as I turned up on the first morning in my immaculate jodhpurs and flashy jacket. My father was stable jockey and sometimes rode out there, so everyone was scared of treating me badly or giving me any worthwhile challenges. Nor, because I was Franco Dettori's son, were they prepared to take any risks with me or make me do the dirty or dangerous jobs normally reserved for newcomers. You need someone pushing you constantly to help you improve but I wasn't given the opportunity, probably because I wasn't ready.

It was also a major disadvantage that Carlo d'Alessio's team of forty racehorses was the classiest in Italy. The last thing he needed was one of his expensive stars running away with a new lad who should have been wearing L-plates. So I ended up riding the slowest, quietest horses in the yard which, looking back, was just as well. I continued to live at home and cycled to work earlier than everyone else each morning because initially it took me longer to tie up the three horses I looked after and to muck them out properly.

I enjoyed the routine of caring for the same three horses and brushed their coats until they shone like a mirror, but I was by far the slowest lad in the yard at my work. At least I was doing what I wanted after the restrictions of school, but it was pretty clear after only a few weeks that I wasn't making any progress. Dad would turn up every few days to check up on me and immediately start shouting: 'Let your leathers down, you're riding too short, keep your bum down, try to look tidy—do this, do that, do the other.' I tried to take it all in, but most of his advice was forgotten by the time I climbed onto another horse and I would be back to riding with my stirrups too short again. The truth is that whatever I did he was never satisfied, and the next time he appeared at the yard he would start shouting at me all over again. This went on week after week until I had the firm impression that he felt I was useless. I began to go into my shell whenever he drove into the yard and kept quiet because whatever I said didn't please him.

I was frightened of upsetting my father and the trainer. I was also frightened by all the shouting because I didn't know how to do the job properly and was terrified I'd make a disastrous mistake on

a valuable horse. Some of the lads tried to help with useful hints, but no-one had any confidence in my ability and often I ended up on the same horse twice in the morning because it was the only safe one available. She was so lazy and fat she needed to go out twice to lose a little bit of weight.

Things weren't much better at home in the evenings. That summer my dad fixed a long set of leather reins onto the metal frame of a well in our garden which was covered in ivy. Night after night he'd show how to hold the reins, the right way to make an arch with them, and then encourage me to change my hands on the reins while holding a whip as though I was riding a finish.

At this stage I could trot and canter—but in racing terms I could hardly read or write, and I couldn't understand why he was taking such pains to teach me the basics. Why the hell did it matter so much? The lessons continued for half an hour or more on most evenings whenever Dad was home. He would start me off, then mow the lawn or sit down and read a newspaper, keeping an eye on me all the while, shouting instructions and occasional encouragement as I wrestled energetically with the reins.

Within a few months I was changing my reins and passing my whip through from one side to the other without thinking about it, all because of those endless lessons beside our garden well. Once I started race riding it came as second nature to me, and even now I don't think about switching my whip or changing my hands. I just do it. Sometimes after a race the stewards will ask how many times I used my whip in a finish, and I don't know the answer until I see the video. That's because I do these things automatically, without a moment's thought. Although I'm right-handed, all those sessions beside the well helped me become equally effective with the whip in either hand—which is a big advantage for a jockey. Strangely, though, if you ask any of my rivals, they will probably say I am more vicious with the whip in my left hand.

When you are twelve or thirteen and your dad tells you what to do you don't have any choice. Everything he said I took as gospel. We had our differences, but to me he will always be a genius for clawing his way to the top of the tree by meeting every challenge with the whole of his being until he dominated flat racing in Italy like no jockey had ever done before or since. When I started in racing I was lost in his shadow, but I was hugely proud that he ended 1983 with a record of 229 winners in Italy—a score that is unlikely ever to be matched.

By the time the summer season was drawing to a close I'd reached an important crossroads in my life. In the late autumn everything closes down in Milan, which can be as cold as New York in the winter. My dad didn't want me wasting my time trotting around an indoor school for three or four months, learning nothing but bad habits. He then had a flash of inspiration by sending me to work for Tonino Verdicchio at his winter training quarters in Pisa, a three hour drive further south. At the age of thirteen it seemed so far away from home that I felt he was sending me to the moon, but it proved to be the making of me.

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