

Patrick Mullins
By Donn McClean

Patrick Mullins is sitting in an armchair, quoting Kipling:

*If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same ...*

It has been a year of it.

Patrick had two rides at Cork on 6th November last year, Cork Grand National day. Fairy Court weakened fairly quickly from the third last flight in the handicap hurdle, and his rider pulled him up, but Good Thyne Tara won the mares' bumper like an odds-on favourite should win a mares' bumper.

On his way out of the track, Patrick received a text from a friend: 'Sorry to hear about Vautour.'

It is 12 months later almost to the day, and Patrick Mullins is sitting in the Lord Bagenal Hotel drinking tea, but everything about him – his expression, his voice, the words that he chooses – tells you that Vautour's demise still gets him.

"It happened so fast at home," he says slowly. "It was just one of those things. Out in the field. An Act of God."

He takes a sip of tea, takes a moment.

"Vautour achieved so much. A three-time Cheltenham Festival winner, and yet, we still probably hadn't seen the best of him. That King George, Don Cossack won the Gold Cup that year, Cue Card fell when he was going well. And Vautour was probably going the wrong way around and racing on ground that was softer than ideal for him."

The Cheltenham Festival was made for Vautour.

"He wouldn't excite you in his homework, even in the spring. But once he got to Cheltenham, good ground, left handed, he just lit up. He was an unbelievable horse."

That was a tough day all round. Two and a half hours before Patrick had gone out to ride in the handicap hurdle, Avant Tout had made his seasonal debut at Naas. The horse had jumped the first fence awkwardly, he had struck into himself, and Paul Townend had pulled him up immediately. Unfortunately, however, the injury that the horse sustained was fatal.

“That was difficult for everybody,” says Patrick. “For the owners Supreme Racing. Avant Tout had won twice at the Punchestown Festival, he was their Hennessy horse, he was their Vautour. Unfortunately, these things happen in racing. As Dad says, once it’s outside your back door, you learn to deal with these things and you move on.”

*And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss ...*

Things happen in racing. Owners, for example. They come and they go. Patrick’s dad Willie has always said that you can’t rely on one big owner, that some trainers make the mistake of seeing one owner as a pension. He has seen it before, owners leaving trainers, he has seen it with his own dad, the legendary Paddy Mullins, and he vowed that he would never allow himself get into a position in which he was over-reliant on one owner.

Nevertheless, the tiny corner of the globe that is the National Hunt racing world reeled when the news broke last September that Gigginstown House would remove all their horses from Willie Mullins’ yard.

*If you can bear to hear the truth you’ve spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools ...*

It was down to fees, an increase in training fees. At the time, people dug for a deeper reason. There must be more to it, went the hypothesis. The Irish yearning for a good yarn. But there was no yarn. It was as simple as it looked. It was economics 1.01: the seller increased the price and the buyer wasn’t willing to pay.

“We hadn’t increased our prices in 10 years,” says Patrick. “So we thought it would be fair and justifiable to increase them by 10%. Michael came back and said, I don’t agree. And you could see his point. He had 60 horses in training. He wasn’t being unreasonable or irrational. But the way we looked at it, how can you charge Joe Murphy down the road more than you charge Michael O’Leary?”

You could say that Michael O’Leary spends more, therefore he should be entitled to a bulk discount?

“You could look at it that way, but we took the other view. That, if it was fair for one man, then it was fair for every man. It wasn’t an easy decision, and it wasn’t made after one discussion. But I think we basically took the view that the right decision was the right decision and let the consequences be what they will be. You have to stand by what you think is right.”

It was a big call, it was a brave call. Willie Mullins and his team had bought the horses, they had sourced the horses, they had pre-trained the horses. Young horses and experienced horses, they had all been trained with

an eye on the future. And at that stage of the year, just as the National Hunt season was starting to flow, it was going to be impossible to replace them in time for the season that was stretching out in front of them.

Not only that, but the horses weren't disappearing, they were joining the opposition. You had to go and beat them now. Double-whammy.

Willie Mullins has dominated Irish National Hunt racing for over a decade, and yet, you know that these things are cyclical. There is an ecological balance that, if it is disturbed, can cause seismic shifts.

When Patrick Mullins was growing up, Noel Meade was perennial champion trainer. He remembers sitting in his kitchen, talking to his mum and dad about it and concluding that you would never beat Noel in terms of number of winners, but you might beat him in terms of prize money won.

The removal of 60 high-class horses from Closutton had the potential to affect the balance. Distribute those 60 horses among your professional rivals, and there's your potential for a seismic shift right there.

"I've seen what my father has created," says Patrick. "I know that his father was champion trainer, but my father has created what we have now from scratch. It was a greenfield site, he started with one barn. And he has created this amazing operation. So by standing firm on this decision, you were losing 60 of your best horses from the yard, and everything was going to be very different. It was a big call. You were wondering, is that the end of the peak? Can you get back to where you were before?"

There were other questions though. Like, do you go down the path that you believe to be the correct path? Do you remain true to yourself, even if it means that you might not be as successful as you have been to date? Or do you deviate from that path, make an allowance, make an exception, in the express pursuit of victory?

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss ...*

"There was no falling out," says Patrick thoughtfully. "I have always got on well with Michael and Eddie, I still get on well with them, I have ridden winners for them since, but you have to stand by what you think is right."

You know how the story unfolded and how it ended by now. The battle between Willie Mullins and Gordon Elliott raged for the year. It was a thread that ran through the entire season. Elliott led until the 11th hour, until the last few days, when Willie Mullins overtook him on the run-in at Punchestown. It may not have been enjoyable for Team Elliott or for Team Mullins while the battle was ongoing but, for the racing public, it was pure theatre, and it was captivating.

“I think that it was good for the sport,” says Patrick. “I can see that. I can look outside our own little bubble. While last season might not have been hugely enjoyable for us, I can see that, looking in from the outside, it could have been one of the most exciting National Hunt seasons in years. And it was exciting for us in the end, after it was over!”

The 2016/17 season was a trying one for Team Mullins on other levels too. Faugheen never made it to the races. Annie Power never made it to the races. Min didn't run after Christmas.

“Faugheen and Annie Power,” says Patrick with a sigh and a smile. Unusual combination.

“Their problems were just niggly little things. They were never out, they were always in training. It was just that, before they went to run, just the final little bit of tightening, and something would go. Something small, and it wasn't always the same thing.”

They're fragile beings. You can never take the soundness of a racehorse for granted.

“Even coming up to the Punchestown Festival in April, Annie was all set to run. And just her final piece of work, she didn't sparkle. It was a good piece of work, but it wasn't Annie Power. Obviously the title was up for grabs that week, and I was thinking, sure run her, if she gets beaten she gets beaten. A less-than-100% Annie Power would beat most, and even if she doesn't win, she'll surely pick up big prize money for finishing placed. But my father said no. She's not right, she doesn't run.”

The trainers' championship was important. The trainers' championship is always important. Any championship is important. Even so, it didn't change the way they campaigned their horses. Even though the championship went down to the last couple of days, the horses still came first.

If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you ...

“I learned an awful lot last season, just watching my father, how he did things, the decisions he made. Annie Power at Punchestown, she was fit, she was ready to race, but Willie just didn't think that she was herself, so he didn't run her. He never panicked, it was a dry autumn and a dry winter, and Gordon was winning all those big handicaps, but Willie waited until the ground and the horses were right. He never put the championship ahead of the horses. He has huge self-belief, and he has this annoying habit of being right.”

Patrick is keen to highlight the role that his mother plays.

“Jackie is unflappable,” he says. “She is rock steady. Last season in particular, she was a great sounding board for my father in moments of

doubt.”

Invariably, you learn more in times of adversity than you do when the sun shines.

“It isn’t that we had an easy time of it the previous few years. Everybody worked hard and we were successful, but it is when things go a little bit against you that you learn. I learned more last season than I’d say I learned in any season ever before.”

There were highs last season for Patrick Mullins though. Bacardys in the Grade 1 Deloitte Hurdle at Leopardstown in February was a high. Willie ran six in the race, Ruby Walsh rode Saturnas, Paul Townend rode Bunk Off Early, and Patrick was delighted to be able to get back on Bacardys, the horse on whom he had won the Grade 2 bumper at Aintree the previous April.

“I wanted to ride him handy at Leopardstown,” says Patrick, “because I thought that he would stay well. And he does stay, but he also has pace, and Willie wanted me to take my time on him, which I did. There’s Willie being right again.”

He speaks fondly about Bacardys, says that he is an intelligent horse, that he knows why he is racing, that he knows the objective is to beat the other horses. The very good horses have that intelligence, he tells you. Quevega, Hurricane Fly, they knew all right, they knew that they had to beat the others. Bacardys knows too.

“I had never ridden a Grade 1 hurdle winner. I’d always be setting little targets for myself. I’ve been lucky enough to win Grade 1 bumpers and to win the Grade 1 chase on Douvan, and I thought I should have won a Grade 1 hurdle at Aintree on Bellshill, he made a bad mistake at the second last. And you don’t get many opportunities to ride in Grade 1 hurdle races. So it was brilliant to win that day.”

Cheltenham was another high. Or lots of highs. And lots of lows. Cheltenham was a micro rollercoaster all on its own.

“We’ve been so lucky at Cheltenham through the years. You know, you go to Cheltenham and you think, Quevega will win the mares’ hurdle on Tuesday, so that’s one. Getting a winner on the first day is so important. We had no winner the first day this year, Melon got beaten in the Supreme Novices’, I finished third in the four-miler. But the real killer was Apple’s Jade beating Vroum Vroum Mag and Limini in the mares’ hurdle. That was tough. We had been beaten by our ex-horses before, and it wasn’t easy, but getting beaten by one at Cheltenham, that was particularly difficult.”

They re-grouped on Tuesday night. It was only one day, just a blip, and at least they had Douvan to run in the Champion Chase on

Wednesday. Wednesday dawned and Douvan got beaten. Patrick knew at the second fence, when he made a mistake, it wasn't the real Douvan. Bacardys pulled up in the Neptune Hurdle, Bellshill could only finish third in the RSA Chase and suddenly, two days were gone and they still had no winner.

"Things were looking bad on Wednesday evening. We're in Cheltenham, Douvan has been beaten, we have no Faugheen, we have no Annie, we have no Vautour, we have no winner, the Gigginstown horses are gone, and suddenly you're looking at the possibility of no winner for the week. And we were there with 60 horses."

They talked about it on Wednesday evening over a cup of tea back in the house. Patrick wondered what had changed, what had they done that was different to other years. Willie just shook his head. We haven't changed anything, he said. We've done everything right. We just need things to turn around.

If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs ...

"Caroline Norris stays with us in the house for Cheltenham," he says, "and every year she does a photo collage of the winners that we had at Cheltenham the previous year. A friend of mine, Paul Byrne, came in on Wednesday night, looked at the collage and said: 'You might have no collage next year!' Thankfully it turned around."

And how. Thursday at Cheltenham last year was Mullins Day. Yorkhill, Un De Sceaux, Nichols Canyon, Let's Dance, rat-tat-tat-tat, three Grade 1s and a Grade 2, a Ruby Walsh quadruple masterclass, and the cup of tea was a little sweeter on Thursday evening.

"It was relief," says Patrick. "It was different to other years. You have a winner on the first day and you enjoy every winner afterwards. This was just sheer relief. And I remember, even after Yorkhill and Un De Sceaux had won, I was thinking, it's not enough. It sounds wrong, greedy, two is not enough, two winners at Cheltenham, but with the team of horses that we had going over, and the levels of expectation. But then the day just kept getting better. It was some day."

Arctic Fire and Penhill won on Friday, a Paul Townend double, so they ended the week on six winners, but it wasn't enough to claim the top trainer award. That went to Gordon Elliott, who also had six winners, but who had one more runner-up than Willie Mullins. Strange the tops on which these things turn, because if the short head by which Mega Fortune beat Bapaume for second place behind Defi Du Seuil in the Triumph Hurdle on Friday had gone the other way, Willie Mullins would have been leading trainer at Cheltenham.

“We would have loved to have been leading trainer at Cheltenham again,” says Patrick. “Of course we would. But if we had to lose it, at least we lost it to an Irish trainer. And Gordon has done fantastically well, to do what he has done in the space of time in which he has done it, in this era. And I think we push each other forward.”

*If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone ...*

They pushed each other forward for the Irish trainers' championship, that's for sure. Going into Punchestown week, the final week of the season, Gordon led by €400,000 and was long odds-on with the bookmakers to win it. But there was €2.9 million in prize money up for grabs during Punchestown week, and the Mullins firepower was about to be unleashed.

As well as that, Patrick Mullins was just two winners behind Jamie Codd in the amateur riders' championship. Then Jamie rode the first winner of the week, Enniskillen in the Ladies' Cup, and the gap was three. Patrick was beaten a half a length in the opening day bumper on The Butcher Said. Still three.

Jamie Codd rode two winners on the second day, Fayonagh and Minutestomidnight, as Patrick finished second to Minutestomidnight on Mystic Theatre. That extended the gap to five, and the hillock had become a small mountain.

“That was the race that actually cost me the championship in the end,” he says ruefully. “I thought that Barry O'Neill looked to be travelling better than Katie Walsh in front of me, so I thought that I would follow Barry around the home turn, that Katie would fall back and then I could slip out. But actually, Katie's horse responded to pressure, Barry's horse fell back. I ended up getting no run and Jamie came down the outside and won. As it turned out, if it had been me instead of Jamie who had won that race, I'd have won the championship by one instead of losing it by one. That's the way these things go sometimes.”

Djakadam and Un De Sceaux and Nichols Canyon got beaten at Punchestown, but it was still some week for Team Mullins. Cilaos Emery and Melon finished first and second in the Herald Champion Novice Hurdle, Great Field won the Ryanair Novice Chase, Wicklow Brave won the Champion Hurdle, Bacardys won the Tattersalls Ireland Champion Novice Hurdle, Bapaume won the Champion Four-Year-Old Hurdle. Five Grade 1s. C'est Jersey won, Asthuria won, Montalbano won, Open Eagle won, and Willie Mullins was crowned champion National Hunt trainer again.

*If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run ...*

Patrick Mullins almost pulled the amateur title out of the fire too, he nearly

wrested it back from Jamie Codd. Going into the second last day, he was five behind, but he had six rides, and he told himself that it was possible.

He rode a treble on a glorious Friday afternoon, Wicklow Brave, Bacardys and Montalbano, he rode another winner on Saturday on Open Eagle, and he went out on Sparky Stowaway in the final race of the week, the final race of the season, needing to win it to tie with Jamie Codd. Sparky Stowaway was a shorter price than all of the four winners that he had ridden in the previous two days but, alas, he came up short.

“The last two days were magic,” says Patrick. “Selfishly, though, I was gutted that I didn’t at least tie with Jamie in the championship. I’m Willie Mullins’ son, I’m riding Willie Mullins’ bumper horses, so really, I should be winning the amateur championship. So I was very disappointed not to win it. I know it was an unusual season, but I was still gutted. Fair play to Jamie, he was great all season. I just have to go and win it back off him now!”

If you can dream and not make dreams your master ...

Patrick has won the amateur championship nine times, but he seeks more.

“Ted Walsh won it 11 times, that’s the record. I’d love to beat Ted’s record. When I retire, I don’t want anyone to say that I didn’t make the most of what I was given. I realise how lucky I am to be in the position I am in, to have the opportunities that I have. I just want to make sure that I make the most of them.”

*Yours is the Earth and everything that’s in it,
And – which is more – you’ll be a Man, my son!*

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