

Pat Smullen
By Donn McClean

Pat Smullen started to feel some pain in his lower back towards the end of last season. 'Tough season,' he thought. 'Not getting any younger. This is what it is to turn 40.'

He couldn't shake the back pain. He took it easy during the off-season, went on holiday with his wife Frances Crowley and their children, rode in the international jockeys' challenge in South Africa, but still the pain persisted. He had his bloods checked, had an MRI. Nothing.

Starting out this season, he still didn't feel right. The back pain got worse and he started to get a burning sensation in his chest. He was scoped for ulcers and the scope came back clear. Then one day in early March, his urine went a bad colour, and Frances sent him immediately to Dr Adrian McGoldrick, who sent him straight to the Beacon Clinic.

"Even then," recalls Frances, "the initial tests came back clear. White cells, everything looked fine. And he was saying, they can do whatever they have to do, but I have to be back riding for the first day of the turf season at Naas on Sunday."

"My liver function was off," says Pat. "So they thought initially that it might be gallstones. Then they did some scans, and they found the tumour on my pancreas."

Pat Smullen is sitting easily in his chair in his kitchen, looking healthy, fit, strong, his wife sitting comfortably beside him. They are speaking quietly, lucidly, calmly, as if life has not recently dealt them a sledgehammer blow, as if their whole world has not just been turned upside down and inside out.

"They wanted to keep him in overnight in the Beacon," Frances is saying. "But he wanted to come home because he had told Mick Halford that he would ride out for him the following morning."

The tumour was obviously causing the back pain, but it was also putting pressure on his bile duct, which was stopping the bile from getting to his stomach and digesting his food, which was making him feel sick. The bile was going back through his body, poisoning him. He went a jaundice colour, his skin, his eyes.

"They had to put a stent in to relieve that. That was urgent. And it was a complicated procedure, like threading a needle. But they were brilliant. Under Professor John Hegarty. These people, how skilled they are. I can't thank them enough. I started to feel better almost immediately."

“The next two weeks were horrendous,” says Frances. “More tests. Is it anywhere else? Is it in his liver? And you’re waiting to hear. Are the blood vessels wrapped around it? If they are, it is inoperable. Thankfully they weren’t.”

“Thank God, I was fit, so they were able to get a lot of work done in those two weeks. And we knew that we were with the right people. We would have gone anywhere in the world to get the best treatment, but after doing all our research, we concluded that the best people in the world were here, in Ireland, in St Vincent’s in Dublin. Justin Geoghegan and his team, they have been brilliant.”

It is astonishing how, in the face of all this, all they want to do is thank people. The medical team, from the consultant to the nurse, Deirdre, who sat on Pat’s bed one evening a couple of days after his diagnosis, and talked him through what they were going to do, how they were going to beat it.

“She kept saying ‘we’, not ‘you’. She was unbelievable.”

Their families and friends have rallied around. Kevin and Angela O’Ryan, Aidan and Annemarie O’Brien, the boss Dermot Weld, Eva Haefner of Moyglare Stud. Too many to try to mention them all.

“My mother has been great too,” says Pat. “Even just to take the kids, so that Frances isn’t worrying about them when we go up to Dublin for chemotherapy. Eva Haefner has been brilliant. The boss has been unbelievable. I speak to him just about every day, and I go in there whenever I feel up to it.”

And cards and messages from all over the world. They say that they have been overwhelmed by it all. They appear to be surprised by the depth of feeling that there is for Pat Smullen out there. They shouldn’t be.

“All I ever wanted to do was ride horses. That was always my priority: ride more horses, ride more winners, ride better horses, win more big races. Improve as a rider. I took everything else for granted. It’s a terrible thing to say, but I did. Even on that Friday evening, I was knocking the place down so that I would be able to ride at Naas on Sunday. That was all that mattered. But that all changed on Saturday morning. It hit me then.

“In the last two months, I have come to realise that there is more to life than riding horses. I realised that life was passing me by really. Frances, the kids growing up. I just wanted to ride in every race, every day, in Ireland, England, around the world. Of course, I was doing it for the family, but I was doing it for me too. My mind set, my approach to life, it has done a 360-degree turn. Now I can enjoy it all, enjoy the kids.”

The nine-time champion jockey watches every race these days. He watches

the Weld horses run and he wills them home. It used to always bother him if the boss had a winner and he wasn't riding it, but it doesn't now. He wants every one of them to win.

“When you're faced with something like this, it puts everything into perspective. And please God, when we get out of this and when we're healthy and well again, my outlook will be different to how it has been for the last 40 years. I'm a different person.”

If there was one day that he wanted to be riding, it was Epsom Derby day. He would have loved to have been going to Epsom to ride Hazapour for the boss and HH The Aga Khan in the Derby, two years after he won the blue riband on Hazapour's dam's brother Harzand. It didn't mean that he didn't desperately want the horse to win though, or that he didn't go up to Rosewell House in order to give Frankie Dettori all the advice that he could give him beforehand.

“Mentally, I'm very happy with what we've achieved and where we are, and I think that that is helpful in my recovery. I think that a positive frame of mind is very important.”

The chemotherapy floors him. Every two weeks. Every second Wednesday, he and Frances are up in Dublin for his treatment. They can do it in a day, he can come home on Wednesday evening, and he does, but he's wiped out. For about a week. It isn't until the following Wednesday that the strength starts to seep back into his body.

But he doesn't dread those Wednesdays. On the contrary, he embraces them. Every step is a step closer to recovery. And he is relatively pain free. He has a cocktail of painkillers that he chooses not to take.

“I'm eating three square meals a day.”

“He's the only person his dietician has ever seen who has put on weight during chemotherapy!”

Pat Smullen does not under-estimate the magnitude of the task that faces him. But nor does he shrink from it. He has faced this challenge head on and he is meeting it square, all his energies channelled into this one task. Positivity bursting through every pore.

“I believe that if you set your mind to it, there is no limit to what you can achieve.”

More than any other race that he has ever contested in his life, this is a race that Pat Smullen is determined to win.

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