

Racing ahead

Yorkshire is one of England's great racing counties. Sarah Todd talks to the woman trainer with a lifelong passion for horses

Photographs: Bill Wilkinson



Ann Duffield and one of her equine charges

ANN Duffield is a woman with a mission. She wants to dispel the myth that you've got to be super-rich or a member of the aristocracy to be involved in horseracing.

'Racing has an aura about it,' she says. 'Terms such as "the sport of kings" don't help.'

While, yes, many of this racehorse trainer's owners are highly successful people, there's a growing number that are far more ordinary.

'Nowadays so many people are syndicate members. Some are paying as little as £50 a month - well-within the reach of many people - and are able to enjoy all the fun of being racehorse owners. Increasingly, I'm getting a gang of friends coming to me and asking me to help them get involved.'

Ann is a great believer in the Chinese saying 'Find a job you love and you will never work a day in your life' and says this is the case with life at her training yard at Constable Burton, near Leyburn in North Yorkshire. The bottom line is that she loves horses and is always striving to give her string of four legged-friends a good quality of life - in contrast to the sport's traditional hard-nosed image.

'My earliest memories are of my first pony which I got when I was just four years old,' says Ann, who is married to former top jockey 'Gentleman' George Duffield - the seventh most successful race rider of all time.

'I lived in Liverpool then and he was a little Shetland pony who unfortunately disgraced himself by biting my mother. She was not at all impressed. Looking back now I can understand that she was just worried for me, but her decision to have him sent away is a really strong early memory.

'I was absolutely devastated. I desperately wanted another pony, but now she was really wary and reluctant to get another in case something else happened.

'The next few years I spent hanging around other people who had horses in the desperate hope that they would let me help with grooming or tacking up and if I was really lucky, the occasional ride. I was a regular unpaid volunteer at the local riding school, not caring that it was slave labour; but just desperate to be around the horses.



The racing stables

'Nowadays it's possible to own a share in a racehorse for a nominal monthly amount'



The facilities are first class

'I think Mum thought that I would grow out of it and find other interests eventually, but in actual fact my passion for horses just continued to grow. I remember being incredibly jealous of other children with their own ponies, many of whom just seemed like spoilt brats who didn't appreciate what they had.

'Eventually I started, in effect, to make myself ill. My parents took me to see a consultant, which turned out to be an amazing turning point. He realised fairly quickly that I didn't actually have anything seriously wrong with me and asked "What is it that you really want? What do you think is wrong with you?" Naturally I replied "I just want a pony!"

'The consultant was great. He tactfully suggested to my parents that I should be

"allowed to partake in something she enjoyed that would get her out in the fresh air" so that was it.

'After all those years, suddenly the battle was won! At the age of 12 my poor parents bought me my first proper horse. Needless to say the consultant's recommended treatment was a great success.'

Ann went on to own a nursing home, moving to Yorkshire and pursuing her first love of horses after selling the successful business.

'I started out training a small number of horses in Richmond and got my licence in 1992,' she explains. 'I was really lucky to get five winners in my first year. I couldn't believe it. Everything just seemed to fall into place.'

Ann went on to marry George and, after a

long search, the couple moved to their current stables, where the number one priority is always the horses themselves.

'We always say that we are the racing stable where the horses come first,' says Ann, 'and that's true right down to how we designed the place.'

'My passion for horses remains at the very heart of what we do here. I think it's sad that many people are still missing out on the thrill of the racing world because they think it's expensive and a closed shop'.

That's a myth really, because nowadays it's possible to own a share in a racehorse for a nominal monthly amount, so we are working hard to introduce the sport to new owners. We have so much to offer here in the heart of the Yorkshire Dales - even a holiday cottage at the yard so owners can come and stay and really feel a part of the racing world.

'I still remember those early childhood days when I looked on in envy at the horsey people and wanted to be part of their world, so I think it's probably partly down to that that I work hard at introducing new owners to the sport, helping them to buy their horses and involving them in this wonderful life we have here.'

While Ann is the trainer, there can be no doubt that having such an experienced horseman as her husband has helped.

'George chooses how involved he is,' says Ann. 'I'm the trainer and do most of the socialising and so on but his help in riding the horses - such as teaching the youngsters and assessing their ability - can't be underestimated. It's also fantastic to have him to liaise with the jockeys. After all, he talks the same language.'

• Tel: 01677 450303 for more information or visit Ann's website on www.annduffield.co.uk. Ann is guest speaker at the Ribble Valley and White Rose Ladies lunch, which raises funds for children's cancers, on December 3 at the Rendezvous Hotel, Skipton. Tickets cost £25 and are available from The Rendezvous on 01756 700100.

Competition

Win a weekend break at Ann's racing stables

SET amid breathtaking scenery, Ann Duffield Racing at Constable Burton is renowned as one of the best run racing stables in the country.

Ann and her husband, retired top class jockey 'Gentleman George', invite our lucky competition winners to enjoy a country weekend at their home. Their luxury holiday cottage accommodation is ideal for a relaxing break exploring the Yorkshire Dales, with a taste of the racing life. Our competition winners will get a guided tour of the yard, watch thoroughbreds grazing in the paddocks and enjoy the excitement of watching the horses' early morning exercise on the gallops.

Nearby are the ancient castles of Richmond, Castle Bolton or Middleham, the magnificent Dales landscape, and the bustling market town of Leyburn is just three miles away.

For a chance to win this weekend break, simply answer the following questions.

Where are Ann's stables situated?

What is the nickname of her husband?

Send your entries to Racing stables competition, Yorkshire Ridings magazine, Oyston Mill, Strand Road, Preston PR1 8UR. Closing date is January 20th 2008. Normal competition rules apply and the editor's decision is final.



Off for an autumn gallop