


Pursuits

The things we long to do



“In a sport based on gambling,
David Pipe leaves as little
as possible to chance” ➤➤

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trainer on the early morning gallops*

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➤ The drumming of hooves is the only sound to break the silence as horses gallop through the mist.

It is a crisp autumnal morning, not much after 7.30am, and David Pipe's working day has just begun. The racing trainer is intent, his eyes scanning each horse for movement, pace and fitness.

Pipe knows each of the 110 thoroughbreds in his care at a glance, and can assess their progress mid-stride as they thunder up his all-weather gallops. But his methods of racehorse training – inherited from his father, the retired champion trainer Martin Pipe – rely little on intuition.

As each group of horses flies past, Pipe ticks them off on a computer print-out detailing the animal, the designated riders and their weight, coupled with the amount of work each horse must do today and at what pace. The riders gather the horses in a steaming, snorting circle at the top of the gallops before walking back down for another run. As they do, Pipe talks to the riders about how their mounts have performed.

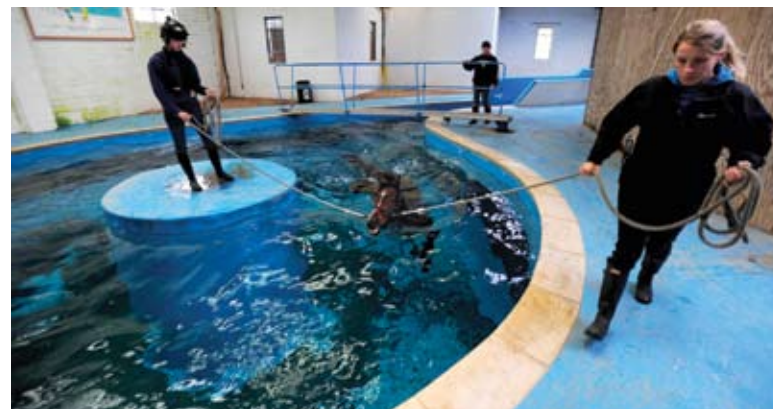
I've come to Pipe's yard to find out how a trainer brings a horse to peak performance for a big race, such as the Hennessy Gold Cup, which will be run for the 50th time at Newbury next Saturday. Pipe should know – he won the race last year with Madison Du Berlais, one of the first horses on the gallops this morning. In a sport based on gambling, it is clear that Pipe leaves as little as possible to chance.

When his father began to enjoy success as a trainer in the 1980s, his revolutionary methods caused some controversy. But, says his son, "his horses were just fitter than the competition." Pipe concedes diplomatically that there is no one right way to train a horse, but notes: "My father introduced interval training and everybody does it now."

Most horses are ridden alongside one or two others so that their innate sense of competition makes



Heat rises off the horses after a gallop; (below) the exercise pool; (right, from top) Mr Thriller and Pipe; the indoor school; on the gallops



Pipe raced for six years, but at 6ft 5in, it was a struggle: "I never ate anything"

them work harder. But occasionally a more nervous or flighty horse works alone. Pipe says the key is to tailor the training to the animal: "They are more intelligent than we give them credit for."

Back at the yard, it looks like mayhem. Horses are everywhere, being washed off and walked to cool down, or tacked up for the second set of exercise gallops. Lads scurry to grab saddles. Wherever I stand, I seem to be in the way.

Pipe ducks briefly into the office and grabs the print-out for the next string on the gallops. The science

does not end with the exercise regime. Pipe shows me the yard's lab, where the horses' blood samples are tested twice a week and tracheal washes are taken from their windpipes to provide early warning of any infection. Even the feed is manufactured to the yard's own formula.

Bumping along in his Jeep next to the horses cantering up the hill as we return to watch the second gallops, Pipe admits that he has a sophisticated operation for a 36-year-old trainer only in his fourth season.

The 350-acre farm near Wellington, Somerset, was bought by Pipe's grandfather after he sold his bookmaking chain. His father then transformed it into a prestigious training yard, complete with private gallops, exercise pool and indoor schooling and jumping areas, confounding conventional wisdom that it was impossible to train at the top level outside racing's command centres, Lambourn and Newmarket.

The facilities are a mark of his father's success, but in an industry

How to... bet at the races

Placing a bet can be daunting for the uninitiated. The easiest option is to use one of the many Tote kiosks scattered around courses. The Tote pools all bets placed and shares out the proceeds among winners, so odds are never guaranteed.

In the betting ring, where bookmakers display odds on their boards, the price you see is the price you get. But the odds can, and do, change rapidly. David Hood at bookmakers William Hill, says: "If you want to back a horse and see the price contracting you want to get on your toes a bit sharpish before the price drops any further."

The bookmakers situated on the "rails", at the division of the members' enclosure and the less elite grandstand enclosure, are the bigger operators and accept the largest stakes, but punters may find better odds by shopping around.

Bob Sherwood

predicated on results, Pipe's reputation, and business, is now in his own hands. "I wouldn't like [the stress of] being a Premiership manager," he says, "but this probably isn't far behind."

It is, though, a mantle he was born to take on. Even at private school, his thoughts were on the racecourse. "I read the Sporting Life every day and I would phone my dad at 7.30 every morning with my bets." He rode in races for six years, but at 6ft 5in, it was always a struggle: "I never ate anything."

By the time we are at the head of the gallops, it is late enough in the morning for Pipe to start speaking to owners. With his mobile at his ear, he takes his eyes off the horses only long enough to consult and mark his list. I overhear snatches of conversation: "I've entered him because of the weather forecast... the ground will suit us... I'll see who's available to ride... he worked well this morning."

A couple of horses stand out. Pipe tells me to stand close to the car and keep still as we watch the chestnut Well Chief gallop up on his own, head raised and eyeing us nervously as he passes. He is one of the stable's best horses but spooks easily and has previously damaged tendons. As a result, he gets the cotton wool treatment, as well as a swim in the indoor equine pool after his workout.

Pipe shares a joke with the lads at the expense of jockey Johnny Farrelly, who is celebrating his 25th birthday. But then his mood changes as he pulls Farrelly aside to give his mount, Mr Thriller, a quick schooling over hurdles before he races at Chepstow the next day. "Right, this is serious," he snaps.

It will be Farrelly's first ride on Mr Thriller and Pipe wants him to pop over a few jumps to make sure he is comfortable with his mount. It's a risk, however slight, that he wouldn't usually take. The affable Pipe is suddenly tenser than he has been all morning.

He drives alongside as Mr Thriller takes the hurdles comfortably in his stride. Pipe, relaxed again, smiles broadly.

But it is 9.45am and, with a 10am cut-off to declare riders for the next day's races, Pipe is on a deadline. He heads straight back to the office and plonks himself in front of a computer.

Alternately scanning the screen and a copy of the Racing Post, his



THE DETAILS
The Hennessy Gold Cup will be the climax of the Winter Festival held at Newbury Racecourse on November 26-28; www.newbury-racecourse.co.uk/winterfestival

More information on David Pipe at www.davidpipe.com

conversation with the office staff who administer the entries is as abbreviated as a City trader's: "What's the going?" "What's the forecast?" "There are only three in that race – keep an eye on that."

With the deadline passed, Pipe still has to watch the third gallops and prepare for the 12pm daily deadline for declaring runners for races five days ahead.

The morning has gone smoothly, but the proof will come later on the racecourse. I ask Pipe how he deals with the inevitable highs and lows that come with the job. He answers: "Yesterday I won a seller [the lowest class of race] and I was over the moon. That was my father's dream when he first started." He doesn't mention any losses.

The next day, in a spirit of journalistic curiosity, I stake a few quid on Mr Thriller. I can now appreciate the work and worry that goes in to producing a winner. So it's not just the 13/2 odds that make me smile when I see the horse romp home. ■

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