

'Cut your hair short and no one will know you're a girl'

Karen Wiltshire recalls the naughty pony called Rocket who got her started, learning from Willie Carson and being the only girl on the gallops

MY parents weren't horsey, but when I was six I went to the local riding school. I fell in love with a naughty pony there called Rocket. The riding school closed and I begged my parents to buy him. When Dad said we had nowhere to keep him I suggested we move house – which, incredibly, we did!

Dad took me and Rocket to gymkhanas and pony races. When I wanted to do some showjumping, he bought me a part-bred thoroughbred. His grandsire was Derby winner Blue Peter – he was fast.

I always knew I wanted to be a jockey. I loved the speed and competitiveness. I went to a very strict convent school, so the feeling of freedom when galloping was therapeutic.

I left school at 16 – but continued studying for A levels at evening college – to compete at BSJA grade C. I was up against top showjumpers like Harvey Smith, David Broome, my idol Marion Mould and event rider Princess Anne.

There was no discrimination against women in showjumping, so it was a shock when I later experienced it in racing.

I wrote to trainer Bill Wightman to ask for a job. He was interested in me because I was lightweight and had experience with horses. I was 8½ stone and I knew I could get down to 6st 10lb to ride at 7st 1lb.

Bill believed women made good riders. He thought they had better hands and a good rapport with the horses. But he said

he couldn't give me preferential treatment over the lads. I'd have to survive a winter backing the yearlings to prove myself.

I had no idea how dangerous that job was until I did it. The yearlings would rear up and fall over backwards all the time. Falling off was a daily occurrence and I was lucky not to pick up any serious injuries.

CULTURE SHOCK

It was a culture shock being the only female on the yard – especially coming from a convent school! The lads were always calling me names. And on the gallops, the minute Bill's back was turned they'd hit me with their whips or try to pull me off. Luckily it just made me more determined to stick it out.

I remember we weren't allowed to use wheelbarrows for some reason, so we had these muck sacks. You had to put the manure in the middle, get all four corners and carry it on your back to the muck heap. It was awful, it seeped down your neck. My boyfriend at the time arrived one day with a pink wheelbarrow for me – well, you can imagine what the lads said to that.

I didn't go to racing school, I learnt on the gallops. When we had professionals like Willie Carson come and work the horses, I would quiz them to learn as much from them as I could. I liked the new streamlined style that American jockeys like Steve Cauthen had, and I based my style on his.

ABOUT KAREN...

KAREN WILTSHIRE was the first female professional jockey to win on the Flat in the UK. She's written a book about her experiences, *No Place for a Girl*. Now she runs a leisure centre in Hampshire and works as a fitness instructor. She still hacks out friends' horses and would love her own again one day.

When spring came around, I was determined to get the ride that Bill had promised me. My first race was at Newbury on Friday, 13 May 1977. I didn't get anywhere but it made me want more.

I started riding a horse called The Goldstone and we were placed a few times. Taffy Thomas, who rode regularly for Bill, told me that as soon as The Goldstone was fit enough, he'd be taking over the ride. I thought, "I'm not going to be used to get the horse fit and then let someone else win on it!" I threatened to leave Bill's yard and he promised me I'd get my chance.

MILESTONE MOMENT

ON 14 September 1978 I was given the ride on The Goldstone in the Winterbourne Handicap at Salisbury. The prize was £2,000 – a lot of money back then. The Goldstone liked to race a certain way. He had a turn of foot but only in the last few strides. You had to hit the front at just the right time – if you were there too soon, he wouldn't give you the turn of foot.

At one point, I was blocked in. I took a huge risk and pushed him through a small gap. You're so close to the other horses

you're clicking heels and could easily bring your horse or someone else's down.

Luckily it paid off, we hit the front at just the right time. We won by two-and-a-half lengths, making me the first professional woman jockey to win on the Flat in the UK.

Not that anyone really knew that, because Bill had said right from the start, "Don't show up as a girl. It will be easier if you go out as K Wiltshire. Cut your hair short and no one will know."

I thought winning would change things and I'd get more rides. In total, I rode 19 races on the Flat, including Kempton, Chepstow and Sandown Park. I picked up three thirds and one second at Epsom alongside my win. But Bill was still having difficulty convincing the owners to let a female jockey ride their horses.

PASTURES NEW

IN the end I left racing and went into business with Dad instead, managing the leisure premises he had bought. A month after it opened, I had a letter from an Austrian trainer in Vienna asking me to be his first jockey, racing at all the top courses in Europe. But I'd made a commitment to Dad, so I didn't take up the offer.

I always thought I might return to racing but it never felt like the opportunities were there for women. It wasn't really until 25 years after my win that the glass ceiling was broken by Hayley Turner. Even now there are only a few top female professionals.

Now I campaign for equal opportunities for professional women jockeys. Racing is a great career. My advice to girls getting into it? Never give up! **H&H**

● As told to Catherine Welton

My equestrian mantras

WHAT I have learnt from racing is, the more you know about a horse, the easier it is to keep yourself safe. Horses are creatures of habit and they have a good memory – if you know what's happened to them in the past and where it happened, you can understand their thought processes and more easily predict their behaviour.

Although I have benefited from riding lessons in my

career, I always felt that the best way to learn was to watch the top riders. Whether I was showjumping or racing, I have been lucky enough to learn from the best in the business.

Don't forget fitness – when you've got to be super-fit as a jockey, you never lose it. When I teach my cardio classes, I can still outpace teenagers and I'm in my 60s! People can't believe how fit I am at my age.

Illustration by Emma Earnshaw