

Showjumping commentator

Phil Ghazala on how an article in *H&H* led to an accidental career move, why his favourite horse isn't a showjumper and how sometimes silence is golden, even for a commentator

I grew up riding show ponies; I was one of six children and we all rode.

When I was seven, I went to boarding school so I didn't do a great deal of riding except in the holidays. The moment I left school, at 18, I went to work for racehorse trainer Josh Gifford, Tina Cook's father. He was one of the greatest men I ever met.

My dad was an amateur racing driver. In fact, he famously once beat Stirling Moss, who believe it or not at the time was dating my mum!

In 2003, *H&H* ran a competition to find the next equestrian voice of the year. The criteria were that you must never have been paid to do any commentating. Some 250 people applied and were sent a brief and a VHS tape, which had some showjumping and some showing on it. You had to do a voice-over and send it to the broadcast company in London.

I was one of three people chosen to do live arena announcing at Hickstead. There was a panel of three judges. When they announced that I'd won it, I was lined up like one of the horses and presented with a rosette by Douglas Bunn! Within two

weeks of that contest, I was working live for Eurosport.

In all honesty, I can't remember exactly why I applied. I am one of these people that will say what's the worst thing that can happen? And if the worst thing that can happen is nothing too serious, then I give it a go.

I was once told that my brief was to make showjumping more exciting. I feel

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immensely privileged to have commented on the best horses and athletes in the world for nearly 20 years. I covered my 16th World Cup Final this year.

You don't need to talk the whole time, it's a balance. You have 40 horses jumping an identical course. You give a nice intro, do the exciting bits, and give a bit of additional information. Around 70–80% of what I say is for the educated viewer. We know that most of our audience knows something about the sport.

That said, I like to have at least three times more

information than I actually need – you never know what's going to happen.

At the Nations Cup final in Barcelona a few years ago, the last round was under lights. We were live on air, and just as the first horse was coming down the tunnel to the arena, one of the lighting panels failed.

It took one hour and 40 minutes to get it back on, and I had to fill that airtime with my co-commentator, Jess

Kürten. That's where having the knowledge really helps to fill the time.

I feel a responsibility to the athletes I'm commentating on. They've heard me long enough to know I'm not going to let them down. Whatever happens in the ring, I'm going to say something positive.

One thing that does make me cringe is when we're all on the coach from the venue back to the hotel and some athletes are watching their rounds on their phones. All I can hear is my voice everywhere.

The broadcasting aspect of the job is the hardest bit. It's hard to explain what it's like

if you've never done it, but you have all these different people in your ear giving you information, this horse isn't coming in, there's a delay, we're going to a break in five, four, three... That's nerve-racking, especially when you're broadcasting live around the world.

Working with animals is never easy, also the national anthem never seems to happen at the right time in the arena! Funnily enough,

I don't think being calm is my personality type, I can actually be quite excitable.

But I'm the proverbial duck – calm on the surface, paddling like mad underneath.

At the moment my favourite horse isn't a showjumper – although he is a jumper.

I'm lucky enough to be one of the 10 owners of Kap Vert (pictured), who's just won the Scottish Grand National. I find it so difficult to put the experience into words, it has to be one of the most exciting things that's ever happened in my life. It's like a dream. **H&H**

● **As told to Catherine Welton**

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WEEK

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