

From hero to zero and back again



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Warren O'Connor had the world at his feet as a rider but addictions led to him having to rebuild, including his relationship with his daughters

Jockey coach Warren O'Connor has put himself up as an example of what substance misuse can do to even the most successful rider, following the suspensions of three Irish jump jockeys for failing drugs tests at Galway in October.

Last month, almost 11 years to the day that the Classic-winning rider became the first jockey based in Ireland to be sanctioned for failing a drugs test, Ger Fox, Roger Quinlan and Danny Benson were handed two-year bans for being found with a metabolite of cocaine in their samples.

There were many self-inflicted factors that led to the premature end of O'Connor's otherwise glittering career as a Flat rider, but cocaine addiction was arguably the most damaging and it cost him far more than the €10,000 fine the

Turf Club imposed.

"You know, I was champion apprentice," he said. "I had the world at my feet - and I blew it."

O'Connor lost everything, and it has taken him ten years to begin to rebuild the life that drug addiction, and bulimia, destroyed.

Now he hopes that talking about his talent, and self-destructive other side, can help stop young riders from making the same mistakes.

"The amount of pressure that young kids are under now," he sighed. "The game has changed. It's not like years ago. Then, when you got rides, you'd nearly keep all of them. Now you could win on a horse and you'll be jocked off. That loyalty is not there.

"The lifestyles have changed completely, too - the drink and the

drugs is huge. It's getting worse, not better."

He became a jockey coach to not just teach riders how to ride well, how to read races and how to read horses, but also to be the person who notices when something is wrong.

"I want to help these young riders and point them in the right direction," he said. "I'm a qualified coach, I'm not a qualified dietician, counsellor or fitness instructor, but I am there to notice if their fitness is not good, if their diet is not good, if psychologically they are struggling - and get them the help they need.

"Because I have been there I know all the angles to go at when someone is in trouble. It's not a nice thing. I had to go to rock bottom to get my life back."

O'Connor started riding in 1984 and >>

View From Ireland

» was champion apprentice by 1990. The following year he won the Irish 1,000 Guineas, Coronation Stakes and Matron Stakes on brilliant filly Kooyonga, also taking the 1992 Eclipse.

He was the hottest property on the market, but no sooner had he hit the top, he was beginning his fall to the bottom.

"I started dieting when I was nine years old," he said. "I wanted this more than anything. And I worked hard.

"I served my time with Liam Browne; it was seven days a week, there were no weekends off. But I loved it. I was always going to make it, no matter what."

He had seen alcoholism in his family and steered clear throughout his youth, dedicating himself to riding, though damaging himself through another vice; bulimia.

He recalled: "How did I get into it? I smashed my ankle and I couldn't go running or jogging for a long, long time, because it was that broken up. So this was an easy way out. Then I got addicted to food.

"I was buying €50 worth of food everyday just to throw it up. But, then, it was that buzz, the buzz of throwing up, getting your heart rate up."

He added: "I lived in saunas all my life; my natural weight was 10st 2lb and I was walking around barely over 8st. I remember even [trainer] Michael

Kauntze saying to me, 'You're killing yourself dieting'.

The year he became champion apprentice, he added drinking to bulimia, and cocaine followed.

"When I failed the drug test in Ireland, I knew I was always going to get caught, but the drug had always told me I wouldn't," he explained.

"That's the addiction. It had complete control over me. When I did get caught, I didn't deal with it properly. I went deeper into the addiction."

This addiction, coupled with his deteriorating Crohn's disease, came to a head late in 2006 when his weight dropped critically low to 6st and he was hospitalised.

"I rode for two or three years when I shouldn't have," he said. "I was pumped up on painkillers. But I just couldn't retire. I didn't want to give up what I'd put my heart and soul into. It had to give me up.

"My body shut down. I was lucky to be alive. Even that fright alone wasn't enough to put me at rock bottom. The addiction had to get worse. I had to lose everything. And I did. I lost my wife, I lost my kids, and that was the most important thing to me - my family.

"The material things, the land, the house, didn't bother me, but losing my family - I took that badly."

With the help of the Irish Jockeys' Trust, Frank Byrne and Helen O'Sullivan, O'Connor kicked cocaine, alcohol and bulimia. He has been free from bulimia for ten years and sober for six, but he will never be cured.

"To this day, if I had a big feed and felt too full I'd have a panic," he admitted. "I'd have the little monkey on my shoulder saying, 'You could do with getting rid of that', even though the bulimia has been gone ten years.

"I go to counselling, I go to meetings, and I need them. I don't run the show, even today. I have a good sponsor, I talk to him every day. I have bad days too, but when I have a bad day I don't take a drink."

There is no demon or question off limits when talking to O'Connor, for anyone, especially his clients.

"There is no point me coaching any young person who doesn't know my background," he said. "Their parents may never want them to come back to me again, but I have to be truthful.

"I know I can rebuild my life again. I have my two little girls back in my life. To be their father, that's the most important thing."

Second to that is to be a father figure



O'Connor: happy days riding Kooyonga

to the numerous jockeys he coaches.

"I want this to work more than anything because it's helping other kids and it's helping me as well," he said. "In my head, I'll never be able to repay what I did with my own career.

"That will always be in the back of my head, I could have gone a lot further. But I'm not going to beat myself up about that. I have moved on and I am happier now, starting from scratch, than when I was a millionaire."

He added: "Would you believe, when the lads ride winners now, I get more of a buzz than when I was riding winners."

Irish racing's last quarter of 2017 could have been remembered for Gordon Elliott's dominance, or Willie Mullins's emphatic Ladbrokes Trophy victory, but it was instead tainted by the drug bans of the aforementioned three jockeys.

The Referrals Committee, after handing down the two-year bans, asked Turf Club Chief Executive Denis Egan to make drug bans start at four years, with no suspended sentences - as was given to all three riders in December.

Perhaps employing more jockey coaches like Warren O'Connor, helping every young rider starting out, is the answer to preventing a repeat - not the tougher sanctions suggested by the Turf Club.

Drug bans

Ger Fox

Irish Grand National winner, based with Gavin Cromwell. Two-year ban, full-time suspended provided jockey submits to a random testing programme and continues to have the support of his employer. To be reviewed in June 2018.

Roger Quinlan

Amateur based with Andrew Slattery. Two-year ban, 21 months suspended provided rider does not breach the same rule again during the period of suspension.

Danny Benson

Amateur previously based with Noel Meade. Two-year ban, to be assessed in June 2018 if jockey positively engages in programme of rehabilitation.