

OBITUARIES

DAVID NICHOLSON

NATIONAL HUNT TRAINER WHO SENT OUT SOME 1,500 WINNERS AND NURTERED
SOME OF OUR FINEST JOCKEYS

DAVID NICHOLSON, who died on Sunday aged 67, was one of the most successful National Hunt trainers of his era.

Known to all as "the Duke", Nicholson sent out 1,499 winners during his 31 years as a trainer; earlier in his career he had enjoyed success as a jump jockey.

There was never much doubt that David Nicholson would make his life in horse racing. Born at Epsom on March 19 1939, he was the son of Frenchie Nicholson and his wife Diana.

Frenchie had been a joint-champion jump jockey before becoming a successful trainer based in Cheltenham; his training establishment was known as the "Frenchie Nicholson Academy for Riders" in tribute to the number of successful jockeys produced there; they included Pat Eddery, Walter Swinburne and Tony Murray. Diana Nicholson was the daughter of the Cheltenham trainer William Holman.

David was educated at Haileybury, but from the age of 12 he rode as an apprentice to his father. He remained in that role until 1960, and was a professional jump jockey until 1974. He once said that he had deliberately volunteered to ride bad horses because he enjoyed "getting the buggers round".

Nicholson rode 583 winners as a jump jockey; and although he never finished higher than third in the jockeys' table, he had some fine wins to his credit. He won the Whitbread Gold in 1967 on Mill House; the Imperial Cup in 1960 on Farmer's Boy; the Cathcart Chase (1962, on Hoodwinked); the Schweppes Gold Trophy (1965, on Elan); and the Champion Chase in 1971 on Tantalum. His last winner was aboard What A Buck, on April 3 1974 at Hereford. In

1961 he had bought Cotswold House, at Condicote, in Gloucestershire, and in 1968 he had taken out a license to train. His first winner as a trainer came with Artic Coral, at Warwick on January 9 1969, but his new career was slow to take off. It was not until the early 1980's, when there was an influx of faster, Flat-bred horses, and when he had the riding services of Peter Scudamore, that he really began to make his mark.

Nicholson's greatest moment as a trainer was undoubtedly winning the Gold Cup with Charter Party in 1988; but he won many other high class races at Cheltenham Festival. These included the Triumph Hurdle (in 1986 with Solar Cloud, and in 1994 with Mysilv); the Arkle Challenge Trophy (1989, Waterloo Boy); the Queen Mother Champion Chase (1994 and 1995, with Viking Flagship); and the Stayers' Hurdle (1999, Anzum).

He had other big-race successes too, among them the Sean Graham Hurdle with Broadsword in 1981; the Mackeson Gold Cup, in 1986 with Very Promising, and in 1991 with Another Coral; and the king George VI Chase in 1993 with Barton Bank. He also won two Scottish Grand Nationals (Moorcroft Boy in 1996, and Baronet two years later).

Nicholson's career was not without its setbacks, however. By the late 1980s his training operation was experiencing financial difficulties, and he was fortunate to be invited to move, in October 1992, to the purpose-built, 80-box Jackdaws Castle, in Gloucestershire, developed by a retired construction engineer, Colin Smith. Smith installed Nicholson as a salaried trainer with a renewable five-year contract; he also looked after the business side, leaving

Nicholson to give all his attention to the horses.

This arrangement proved a great success. In his first season at Jackdaws Castle Nicholson sent out 100 winners, at that time only the fifth jumps trainer since the war to do so.

Nicholson was champion National Hunt trainer in 1993-94 and 1994-95. His innate gifts as a trainer were augmented by a talented procession of stable jockeys. Among them Peter Scudamore (1980-86), Richard Dunwoody (1986-93), Adrian Maguire (1993-99) and Richard Johnson (1999).

Nicholson prized loyalty and good sportsmanship. A traditionalist who retained great respect for the old steeplechasing days, he was a stickler for correct dress. He held strong views and was never reluctant to speak his mind; when wishing to make a point forcibly, he would jab his finger into his interlocutor's chest. One of his admirers, the racing commentator Alastair Down, once conceded: "He was never going to be a loss to the public relations industry."

In 1995 he was fined £1,500 by the Jockey Club Disciplinary Committee following a confrontation with a photographer at Kempton Park; after the hearing Nicholson remarked: "It's a stiff fine, but nothing a large brandy wouldn't cure."

Asked 10 years ago how he would like to be remembered, Nicholson replied: "A good tutor of jockeys, a good schooler of horses and a hard bastard." He was a convivial man who enjoyed celebrating his wins with a "serious glass". At a jockeys' ball in 1970 he threw a raw egg, inadvertently hitting Mrs Frank Osgood, wife of the clerk of the course at Newbury, on the side of the face. He apologised in a

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telephone call and sent her a bunch of flowers.

A great cricket enthusiast, he was a member of MCC.

Nicholson published an autobiography, *The Duke*, in 1995, and retired from training in 1999. In March 2002 he was appointed the British Horseracing Board's bloodstock representative, responsible for promoting British-bred horses at home and abroad.

David Nicholson married, in 1962, Dinah Caroline Pugh, whom he usually referred to as "mother"; they had two sons.

RACING

**NATIONAL HUNT
LEGEND 'THE DUKE'
DIES AT 67**

DAVID NICHOLSON, leading jockey and championship trainer, man of the Old School and racing ambassador, who has died, aged 67, was truly a National Hunt legend, one of whose involvement in the sport spanned a lifetime.

Nicholson was universally known as 'The Duke'. His trademarks were red socks, sheepskin coat, and the stubborn approach of one moulded by the strict regime of a famous father and a desire to succeed in a tough game about which he was passionate.

The stab of the right index finger into the chest of a listener most definitely made Nicholson's point in conversation, but he also left his mark in countless other ways. Partnering 583 winners over 20 years as a jockey, two trainers' titles, success in the Cheltenham Gold Cup, two Queen Mother Champion Chases, and being part of the famous Jackdaws Castle training complex from scratch, were well-known achievements.

Also, the influence on young men who were to make their names as jockeys, including Peter Scudamore, Richard Dunwoody, Adrian Maguire and Richard Johnson, as well as Alan King, a rising star in the trainers' ranks. And then there was his tutoring of the Princess Royal on the finer points of riding under Rules. He was also particularly proud that he had given around 100 jockeys their first race rides.

But the story that is not quite as well known was Nicholson's lifelong fight for survival after first displaying the symptoms of asthma when only six months old. Allergies (including one to horses) afflicted him in childhood to the extent that milk, eggs, fish, jelly and fat were cut out of his diet, and his mother kept a nightly vigil as he was continuously wheezing as he slept.

A series of terrifying asthma attacks in childhood left him close to collapse, yet he was determined to be a jockey and pestered his father, the trainer (and ex-jockey) Frenchie Nicholson, so much that his first race ride came in the Brandon Apprentice Plate at Newmarket in 1951 when he was barely 12 years old.

Those, who knew The Duke only in his latter years would be surprised to learn that he tipped the scales that day at a mere 4st 7lb and needed to carry another 4st in dead weight to reach the required 8st 9lb of his mount Fairval. "My hands were in such a muddle, I nearly poked my eye out trying to hit the poor horse – and I was too weak to carry back the saddle," he was to recall.

His only winner on the Flat came at an evening meeting at Wolverhampton when, riding a horse called Desertcar, he beat Lester Piggott into second. He described it as "a pretty humdrum race." Soon

after, he was to concentrate entirely on jumping.

King, who was The Duke's assistant for many years before taking out his own licence, said: "He had such a love for the support and he leaves behind so many legacies."

Trainer Nicky Henderson said: "He was a larger-than-life man who gave everything to racing. He became a great friend and everyone respected him."

Dunwoody, who partnered Charter Party to Nicholson's most famous win as a trainer, in the 1988 Gold Cup, said: "He was a fantastic boss."

Nicholson retired from training in 1999 and soon enthusiastically embraced a new position specially created for him by the Thoroughbred Breeders' Association, that of roving ambassador.

He was a Deauville for the important sales weekend only nine days ago. Braving the elements – it had been lashing rain most of the weekend – The Duke appeared in the winner's enclosure after the running of the Group One Prix Morny, won by Paul and Susan Roy's Dutch Art. Beckoning me closer, the finger wagged in proclamation: "Don't forget, the winner is British-bred."