

BACK IN THE GAME

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Interview Tim Pitt.

Tim Pitt was an overnight success when he embarked on life as a trainer, but it all turned sour and he was soon looking for another job. Peter Thomas talks to him about starting again at the bottom and his desire to claw his way back to the top.

It was little more than a year ago that Tim Pitt, having secured a string of victories in the top flight for his guv'nor, football agent Willie McKay, announced to the world that he was in receipt of that most dreaded of sporting accolades, the 'chairman's vote of confidence'. With the applause for Les Arcs's Golden Jubilee Stakes success still ringing in his ears, the rookie trainer declared proudly to his top-hatted admirers: "Willie is 110 per cent behind me." McKay, as 'chairmen' often do, rushed to gush about the gifted young man who was wringing Group 1 results from a first XI that had looked, at the start of the season, to be bound for mid-table obscurity at best. "Tim is an exceptional trainer," said the wealthy Caledonian owner of Pitt's south Yorkshire yard. "He's going places." Going places he most certainly was: not so much into the Champions League as out of the door and on the road to the Unibond. A July Cup win for Les Arcs had quickly been added to the roll of honour at Martin Grange Stables, where it sat proudly alongside the silverware for his Royal Ascot win and the Chester Cup triumph of the fragile stayer Admiral. Pitt had also wasted little time in acquiring a 33 per cent strike-rate with his juveniles and a towering reputation as an improver of other trainers' cast-offs, but a stuttering start to the new season was to give him a personal insight into the fickle nature of sporting fame.

In June, McKay decided that what was needed was another trainer - as in two trainers where once there was one. Danny Murphy was drafted in from Singapore to steady what the volatile Scot described as "a bit of a wobble". McKay's 110 per cent backing seemed to the outside world to have become a rather less satisfactory 55 per cent. Three must have seemed a bit too much like a crowd for Pitt's liking and he left the other two to it, with McKay still denying a split while his former employee played the game like an old pro, invoking such key phrases as 'for one reason or another' and 'a mutual parting of the ways'. In the blink of an eye, Pitt had gone from dual Group 1-winning trainer with a big future to unemployed 33-year-old father of two. Although he could draw consolation from the fact that it wasn't the first time McKay had changed horses in mid-stream - and possibly from the fact that he no longer had Joey Barton as an owner - it was nonetheless the kind of kick in the teeth that might have induced an early mid-life crisis in lesser mortals. Not so Pitt. This football philistine's education in the finer points of the offside law may have been a fleeting thing, but his confidence remains intact and the lessons learned as assistant to John Gosden, Peter Chapple-Hyam and Gerard Butler seem set to be put to good use once more. Still tight-lipped on the subject of his departure from Martin Grange, the itinerant handler is hard to stop when he gets on to the subject of his fresh start at the late Jimmy FitzGerald's legendary Norton Grange Stables in Malton, North Yorkshire. He may be living on his wits and in a mobile home, but his rental deal with Jimmy's son, Tim, looks a lot better than many of the alternatives that loomed, and Pitt is a hard man to keep down. "I doubted myself for about five minutes," he says, "but life is full of surprises and you have to build yourself up again. You might sulk for a couple of weeks, but then you have to get up off your arse and do something about it. "We've had a fairly nomadic life anyway, so it wasn't that big a deal, but it wasn't like the old days, when I could just pack my suitcase and go off to Australia or the States. It was a big juggling act.

"Michael his five-year-old son needed to be settled in a school somewhere and Roisin his two-year-old daughter will be starting nursery soon, so you want to get things sorted quickly, but it's no use rushing in and making the wrong decision. This was something we were going to have to live with, so we had to get it right. We finally found the place we knew was right, and if it meant living in a caravan again while we looked for a house, then so be it. "We looked at Newmarket, but when you're starting out, you count every pound and every penny and you get more for your money north of the Trent, so this was more viable. It's the kind of place you immediately find yourself at home in, and I can't speak highly enough of Tim. He knows the game, he understands our position, and he's given us options for the future if things go well." Behind every great trainer, as somebody may once have said, there's a woman it would be unwise to mess with, and Amanda Pitt is no exception to this rule. Tim admits to relying heavily on her support, and it's clear her no-nonsense attitude has been a major factor in their survival. She does home truths better than she does philosophy, but I'm sure hubby never argued when she said: "There are a lot of people worse off than us. We've got savings in the bank and our health. You put the two together and get on with it." Tim concurs: "A disaster is when people die. Nobody died here. Willie gave me the chance to do what I did and I'll always be grateful to him for that, but then I had to move on. Let's face it, before Willie came along, I was just another ambitious assistant looking to get going - nobody had heard of me. But this game's like that: one minute you're sexy and the next the phone doesn't ring for days. "It was a blow, but in times like that you go back to the people who are most important in your life. You can take for granted the support of your family and friends, but when you need them, they're there. The people who have always been there for me were there again, but a lot of racing people we hardly even knew were very supportive as well, which gives you a lift." HAVING declined the option of working as a pair with Murphy, Pitt found himself contemplating a true solo career for the first time in his life. This time there would be none of the luxury of being second in command and none of the security of being an employed trainer. Cash and horses would be far scarcer commodities than at Martin Grange. The Pitts would be flying by the seat of their collective pants, but there's no hint of panic as the search for residents for their 14-box business begins. It's back to basics, but Tim has good basics.

He says: "Racehorse training is a one-man game - it's your name on the licence and you make the decisions. When you're an assistant, you can pick the phone up or leave a note on the office desk saying this horse is lame, that's gone wrong, this owner wants to come and see you on Thursday, leave a list, shut the door and go home to bed, leaving them with the problems. "Some of the girls who worked for me thought I walked round with a vacant look on my face, but it's because there's that much going on in the back of your brain. You're trying to put everything in its place.

"Now I've got to start again, and it'll take a little longer this time. It won't be easy, I know that. I've worked with some very good trainers, and it's not until you've got the reins in your own hands that you realise the amount of self-belief the job takes, but we decided that what we had done for the last two years had worked, and it will work again." The aim now is to fill the 14 boxes over the winter and come out firing live ammo in the spring. The good news is that Pitt has already doubled his string. The bad news is that he's doubled it from one horse to two. But it's a brave man who would bet against him unearthing another dozen in double-quick time.

"I'll be happy with 14 horses for the next 12 months," he says, "but I'm a very ambitious guy. I'm fully prepared to go to the bottom of the ladder again, but I want to get back to the top. "I'll be looking to buy them myself, and I wouldn't be averse to claiming a few, just to get winners on the board, but if anybody wants to ring and tell me they've got one they'd like to send here, I'm not fussy!"

At the moment, he can't afford to be, but by next year, don't be surprised if the caravan has been replaced by a bandwagon gathering an unstoppable momentum.