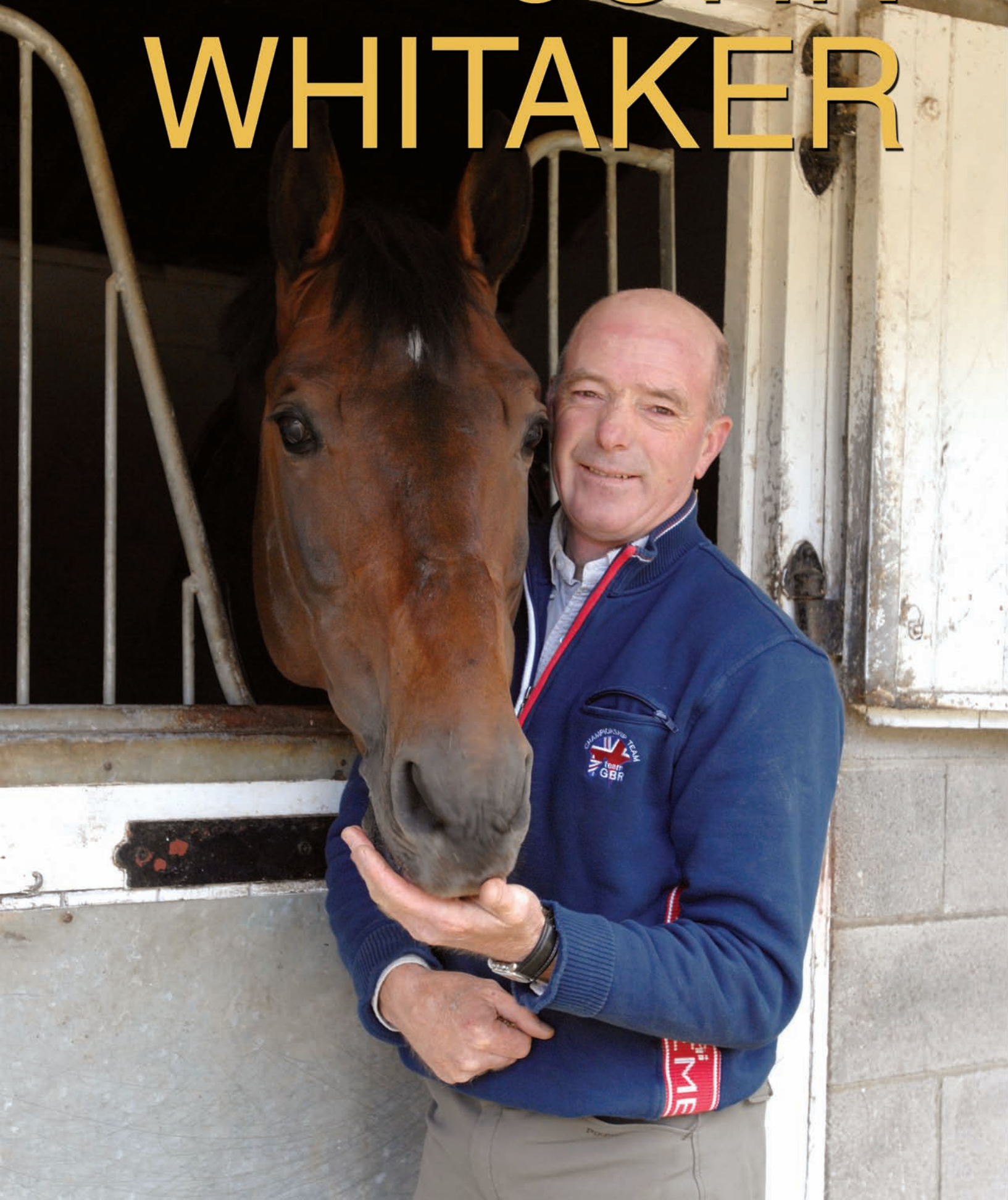


# JOHN WHITAKER



## THE OLYMPIC SHOW JUMPER ON SITTING ON A STAR, FORGETTING THE FAMILY AND MAKING OUT HE'S MICHAEL

### WHEN did you first... start riding?

I had my first pony, Silver, at six. He was quite naughty, but that didn't put me off — it made me more determined. I thought it was great to have some transport at that age. I rode him across the fields to school and back.

### Who was your first... hero rider?

I watched all the top riders as a youngster and tried to copy them, but Harvey Smith had more influence on me than most. He's a Yorkshireman and he did it the hard way.

### When did you first... jump the top of the wings?

We didn't have wings, we had barrels. My brothers, Steven and Michael, and I would build them two-high to jump with the ponies. We were always egging each other on and trying to outdo one another.

### What's the first... funny story you can think of?

When Michael was late for a big show, I put his hat and jacket on and jumped his horse in the ring. I was riding into the jump-off when a steward said, "You're not Michael." "I am," I replied. The judges weren't sure but I think some riders had tipped them off, so I was eliminated.

### What would be your first... choice from a menu?

I'll look at a menu 10 times, but I still

always choose soup and a steak. Traditional English Sunday roasts are very few and far between in our job, so they take a bit of beating, too.

### When did you first... feel like you'd made it?

In 1975, when I won the Cock o' the North at the Great Yorkshire Show on Ryan's Son. It was a big turning point in my career.

### When did you first... appear in a newspaper?

Michael and I once won all the gymkhana games at the Huddersfield Show and appeared in the Huddersfield Examiner, which was quite a big thing at the time.

### When did you first... ride for your country?

My first Nations Cup was in Poland in 1976. When I walked the course and saw an oxer of two walls, I thought, "Bloody hell, this international showjumping is serious." Ryan's Son jumped it all right, but it was the first and last time I ever saw a fence like that.

### When did you last... do something romantic?

I took my wife, Clare, to a horse show in Dublin for our honeymoon, but we did share a room with my brother Steven and Geoff Billington.

### When did you last... lose control of a horse?

Years ago on Red Dawn, who had a reputation for being highly-strung. I lost him in a Foxhunter regional final, but couldn't pull up because I wanted to qualify. He took the final double of oxers in one stride instead of two and as he galloped through the

finish I took my feet out of the stirrups and jumped off — I was a lot younger then. We qualified for Horse of the Year Show.

### When did you last... go on holiday?

I do occasionally get roped into it, but this showjumping game is like one big holiday. You're travelling every week on planes, boats and in cars. My idea of a good holiday is two weeks at home.

### When did you last... lose your temper?

I very seldom do, but I've not been quite as placid since I suffered a brain aneurism in 2000.

### When did you last... suffer a major disappointment?

At the Hong Kong Olympics in 2008, when Peppermill couldn't jump [he was controversially barred after being declared unfit for the first round. I'm sometimes depressed for an hour or two after a bad round, but it took me a couple of weeks to get over that. It was really hard to deal with, as I thought we had such a good chance.

### When did you last... make a faux pas?

I'm forgetting people's names all the time — even the family's.

### When did you last... feel patriotic?

Being chosen to ride for my country is an honour and it brings out the best in me. My first Nations Cup was something special and being selected still is, after all this time. H&H

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#### MY SECRET WEAPON

PATIENCE and perseverance — you need a hell of a lot of both to get the best out of horses. Grannusch [one of John's top horses in the 90s] was very difficult at first, as he'd back off and be too careful, but I knew he had a lot of ability. For three or four years I struggled to get out what I thought he had in him. It was useful that I had Milton and Gammon at the same time, so I didn't have to put him under too much pressure.



▲ John & Grannusch

#### A HORSE I'D LIKE TO OWN... GEM TWIST

APART from Milton, Gem Twist was the best horse I've ever sat on. I jumped clear with him when we had to swap horses in the final of the World Equestrian Games at Stockholm in 1990 and he felt fantastic [John and Milton took silver, while Greg Best came fourth with Gem Twist for the USA]. He was very fast in a jump-off and so quick off the floor that he actually hit me on the chin with his withers over one fence. For me, Gem Twist had everything you could want in a grand prix horse. He was a superstar — I wouldn't have minded keeping him. I know he's been cloned [Gem Twist died in 2006], but it remains to be seen if the replica will have the winning attitude of the original.



▲ Gem Twist: 'The best next to Milton'