

# Injured jockeys' sunshine paradise that helps to ease painful memories of the fallen few



**Alan Lee**  
Sports  
Journalist  
of the Year

IT IS the laughter that is so striking, laughter where there must have been tears. Well past midnight, it cascaded from the palm-fringed terrace where a circle of chairs surrounded a figure prostrate on a sunbed. The group was diverse in age, gender and familiarity, but the unbreakable bond was that all had been damaged by the sport they loved.

For ten days each spring, the pains and injustices of treacherous racing injuries are temporarily eased. Sufferers cast together, sometimes in trepidation, bloom in the sunshine and comradeship of Tenerife. The annual holiday, organised by the assorted heroes of the Injured Jockeys Fund (IJF), is into its tenth anniversary and, to any observer with a pulse of humanity, it belongs to the theatre of life-enhancement.

Mawkishness, however, is strictly forbidden. The strong share their stories happily — and there are some profoundly sad cases here in the Canary Islands — but sympathy is the last thing they seek. Rebecca Hewitt, wheelchair-bound by a fall in a Hereford hunter-chase, stridently summarised the spirit when she warned me: "We don't want any of that emotional claptrap."

Shane Broderick lay at the centre of the late-night laughter, smiling contentedly at the anecdotes and wisecracks. Five years ago, only days after finishing third in the Cheltenham Gold Cup on Dorans Pride, he was paralysed from the neck down by a fall at Fairyhouse. Career over, life in limbo, all at the age of 22.

Sharon Murgatroyd sat in her wheelchair facing him. She has had six years longer to adjust to immobility and, being a feisty Yorkshire lass, she has done so inspirationally. Apart from planning her fifth book, all typed with stabilising pegs on her traumatised fingers, she is learning to play the piano.

Alongside her was the mischievous face of Lee Davies. His promising riding career on the Flat ended in a car accident. He is a tetraplegic, but

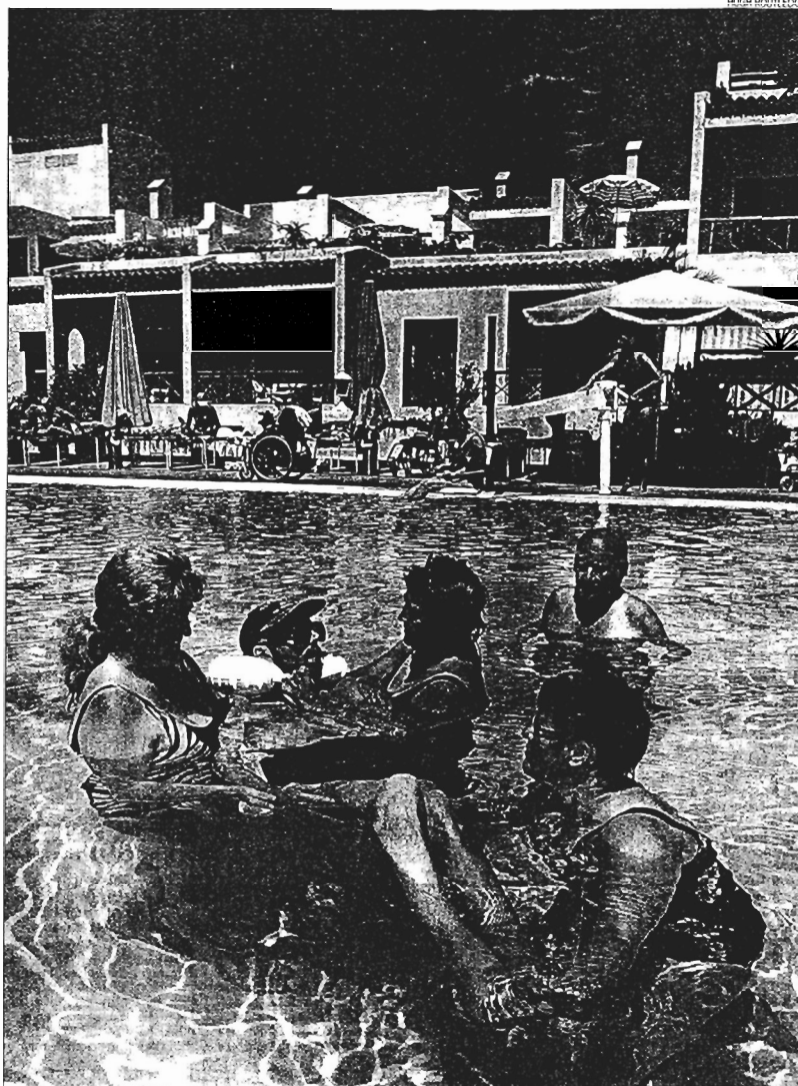
sporting life goes on and his aim is a place in the Great Britain wheelchair rugby team for the Paralympics in Athens in 2004. "Apart from a rule that you can't pull anyone out of their chair, it's full contact," he said with a grin. "It gets rid of all my frustrations."

Des Cullen and Ronnie Singer, elfin epitomes of the caricatured Flat jockey, sat close by. Movement is not their problem. Memory and coherence are the elusive assets for riders with brain damage. The irrepressible Singer, constantly flat-capped, reminisces vividly about waking from three months of unconsciousness after a fall at Aintree more than 40 years ago. What he cannot remember is that he told you the same story five minutes earlier.

THEN there is Sam Berry, just 20 when disabled by a fall at Sedgfield in 1985. Unwittingly, Berry was the instigator of all this when he bought an apartment at the Mar y Sol resort, designed for the disabled. His father, Jack, the former trainer, came out to visit him one Christmas. "I could see the good it was doing him and I remember sitting on the poolside and thinking of my old riding mate, Paddy Farrell, who was in a wheelchair. Then I counted the other ex-jockeys I knew who would benefit from it. By the time I went home, I was determined to bring them out here," Berry said.

Berry, a saint-like figure in this story, raised more than £40,000 to fund the first holiday and repeated the miracle even as costs rose in the next six years. "We couldn't get people to come at first. They were frightened by the idea of going abroad in wheelchairs," he said. "Now, they are scared that they won't be asked."

The financial burden was lifted by an unexpected cheque for £1 million from the late racehorse owner, Robert Hitchens, but Berry still attends each year, more talismanic for the cause than the resident black cat that slinks symbolically around the



Wicketts enjoys the pool in Tenerife assisted by, from left to right, Wiles, Lady Oaksey, Lord Oaksey and wife Jane

sunbeds. For the luckless in fact, coming here is truly a ray of good fortune.

The resort lies in that area of Tenerife where half-finished apartments hustle for space with tacky bars called Desperate Dan's and Big Ben. There are holidaymakers from hell in the vicinity, but Mar y Sol is a haven of peace and dig-

nity. There are hot and cold pools, a fitness centre, physio and doctors on site.

In past years, Fred Winter, his speech virtually gone since an accident at home in 1987, was a silent, smiling presence. Lord Oaksey, the indefatigable chairman of the IJF, said: "It wasn't so much what he got from the holiday as what he

gave to it. He was just about the best at riding and training jumpers and being around him was inspiring to many who would never otherwise have known him." Too ill to travel this time, he is much missed.

Constantly present are the IJF almoners, among them Elaine Wiles and Lady "Chicky" Oaksey. Murgatroyd

calls them Baby Spice and Posh Spice, but the affection for them is evident as they fuss lovingly around the site, nothing too much trouble.

The able-bodied may make an excursion to the seafort bar, where racing from Britain is shown and bets surreptitiously taken, or to the Sunday market by the harbourside. Most-

ly, though, the group — 53-strong this year — make their base near, or in, the pool.

There is a charliff to ease entry, but Murgatroyd disdains this. Each sunlit afternoon, when she gives the word, her two carers will tip or even throw her into the water, one more expression of a free spirit that has even extended to deep-sea diving on a previous holiday here. Wiles said: "We had to lay her out on the stones to get her diving suit on. People were staring and I was worried. But she came back and said it was fantastic."

Murgatroyd, 41, has written around her frustrations and deprivations since her life changed for ever on the opening day of the National Hunt season in 1991. "The simplicity of running a hand through my hair or snuggling between crisp fresh sheets and being enveloped by a hugging duvet is a distant dream — as is the feeling of ground beneath bare feet," she said. Here, though, she feels almost liberated.

The release is not immediate for all. Hewitt, 39, describes her first visit here, soon after her accident: "I was completely unapproachable and it freaked me out a bit," she said. "I felt like an outsider looking in and I didn't want to be part of it. But I've learnt it's what you want it to be — you can do everything or nothing."

Murgatroyd, showing that she can now raise her left hand high enough to drink wine, looks back without rancour. "I've never been bitter, but I have seen people here still too angry about their injuries to appreciate it," she said. "When I first came, although I was mentally OK, I couldn't handle the pain and it showed in my face."

The hollow face of Dennis Wicketts shows little as he is lowered into the pool and his voice can say nothing. Behind the emptiness, though, lies an intensely moving tale, demonstrating that the IJF, and its holiday cares as much for the grass roots of racing as for its glamorous upper level.

Wicketts met his fate in a

'Going abroad in wheelchairs scared them at first. Now they are scared they won't be asked'

remote Cornish point-to-point 18 years ago. His remarkable wife, Jane, said: "We were both riding in the Hunt race at Crimp and Dennis was in front when he fell. I actually went on to win the race before I realised how badly he was hurt." Jane, who was pregnant at the time, has continued to run the family farm, until recently milking 70 cows a day single-handedly, while raising a son and caring for her deteriorating husband. No one can ever have deserved a holiday more.

ANOTHER point-to-point rider, Jenny Litson, is wheeled around the site by her devoted parents. She rode more than 70 winners before a fall at Larkhill deprived her of so much — mobility, speech and even the ability to cry. At least here, among so many friends and fellow sufferers, she does not feel the need of that.

Jonathan Haynes is not here this year, but his spirit lingers on. He was 20 when his back was broken at Southwell in 1980 and his first holiday since was to Tenerife, where he raced his wheelchair down the hill to the seafort, then literally crawled across the beach to demand a try at paragliding.

Haynes, by awful irony, was attached to the Midlands stable of Jimmy Harris, himself confined to a wheelchair in 1971. Harris, who trained with dignity and diligence, was a veteran of Tenerife holidays until his death last June. His widow, Ann, was persuaded to come this year. Last night, as music rang out and Berry twirled wheelchairs on the dance-floor, she reached into her bag and produced a photograph of Jimmy, tanned and smiling at Mar y Sol. "This is how he would want me to remember him," she said. It was a simple, significant testimony to an extraordinary venture.

□ The Injured Jockeys Fund can be contacted at PO Box 9, Newmarket, Suffolk CB8 8SH or via its website [www.ijf.org.uk](http://www.ijf.org.uk)

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