

THIRD TIME LUCKY? BOB'S STORY

THE RETURN OF RIGOUR BACK BOB

Despite the fact that Rigour Back Bob has won seven times, with five placings in his 21 race-starts career accumulating prize money of £120,000 arguably his finest race was in the 2011 Cheltenham Festival Ladbrokes World Hurdle finishing 5th and only 5^{1/2} lengths behind the extraordinary Big Bucks who won an impressive 18 consecutive races with four World Hurdle wins. With Bob hitting a rating high of 153 as a six year old the future for him and his owners looked bright.

However, Bob's owners the Gaticoma Syndicate were to experience the emotional roller coaster that race horse ownership is. By October 2011 Bob's racing future was in serious doubt when he suffered the almost obligatory tendon injury to the superficial digital flexor tendon in both his fore limbs. In November 2011 he was dispatched to Tendonology for his tendon treatment and returned to racing in December 2012.

Possibly not helped by the ground conditions at Leopardstown in his last race his tendons again started to show signs of breaking down. For a second time he travelled over the Irish Sea to Tendonology and was returned five months later with his tendons looking in a significantly improved condition.

However, in November 2013 the news no one wanted to hear came that for a third time Bob's SDFT's were giving cause for concern. The head of the syndicate, respected journalist and former manager of Galway senior hurling team John McIntyre had to face the prospect deciding what to do with a horse they all were extremely fond of but appeared to have fragile tendons and as such looked highly unlikely that he would ever set foot on a racecourse again. Understandably members of the syndicate were emotionally drained by the hope and expectation of the past two years only to have it dashed and made the decision not to keep going with any further treatment option. John was only too aware that many racehorse owners faced with this scenario had few realistic options available to them. However, John was also clear that for him euthanasia was not an option. John's informed me, David Chapman-Jones at Tendonology of the bad news and I agreed to take Bob at no cost to the syndicate to assess his condition and give all some time to decide what the best and assess the realistic options. On 20 November 2013 Bob arrived once again at Tendonology. The clinical examination fore limbs showed there was thickening and a loss of the expected definition of the tissue in the area of the left fore superficial digital flexor tendon (SDFT). This was more apparent when the strain was removed from the tendon, i.e the with the leg flexed. In addition, the tendon was significantly more tender when palpated in this position. Following an ultrasound examination I summarised the condition:

The left fore SDFT was showing significant changes in the architecture of the extra cellular matrix; the structure that make up to tendon (ECM). I suspected that this presentation has been caused by a significant hyper-extension of the left fetlock joint resulting in a significant overstrain of the SDFT causing tearing of fibres of the ECM.



The arrow in the left image shows a thickened and swollen left fore SDFT. The arrow in the right image highlights the delineated area of changes to the ECM of the left fore SDFT. This area is immediately above the fetlock joint.

What Next?

This was a serious injury where nearly 50% of the tendon's cross sectional area was damaged in an area adjacent to the fetlock joint, a difficult place to manage due to the dynamic functional mechanics of the structure. Whilst initially the prognosis looked rather bleak the syndicate and I were clear that Bob was going nowhere and even if he could only return to light work he would join my other racehorse retirees Fighting Chance and Jacopo at home as pets. The syndicate turned over the ownership of Bob to me, safe in the knowledge that he would always be well cared for and had a home for the rest of his days. However, that was not the end of the story.

I decided to treat Bob again this time trying an alternative method in respect of his exercise rehabilitation programme that runs along side the treatment plan. Bob joined the other 'patients' at the treatment centre returning to his old box. Psychologically Bob has always had 'issues'. He has been a chronic box walker and is a very anxious type of individual. I was determined to crack this and when his treatment regime was complete Bob came to live at my home where he joined the other family 'pets'. Here he flourished, the appearance of the tendons improved daily and he was enjoying a regular ride and daily turn out in the back garden. As importantly he had settled and become a delight to have around the place. As time progressed with the frequency, duration and intensity of exercise increasing week by week the idea started to formulate that maybe Bob could race again. I dangled the carrot in front of John and he agreed that if Bob's welfare would not be compromised it would be something to consider but left the decision entirely to me, as his owner.

And Now?

We achieved a lot with Bob at home getting him fit and jumping him with no adverse effects to his tendons. At this point I decided to call in some expert help. What better help and mentor could Bob and I have than former trainer of the triple Cheltenham Gold Cup winner Best Mate, Henrietta Knight?



Henrietta Knight:

A key ingredient In Bob's racing return

If I wanted to ensure that Bob had an expert eye keeping a check on his progress and to advise on the best route to take if he makes it back to racing, in my mind I could do no better than 'Hen'. Although it was an emotional wrench to see Bob leave home he was moved to West Lockinge where he has thrived.

Despite Bob's relatively successful racing career to date I had grave concerns about his jumping ability which I communicated to Hen. Watching his previous races reveals that Bob had a strong tendency to throw himself at the obstacles and an acute failure to concentrate on the job in hand which not only wastes energy but also places significantly more strain on and through his fore limb tendons. Therefore, a key objective was to address this weakness. If he makes it back to racing we had already made the decision to race him over fences rather than hurdles. This means initially he will be racing in novice and beginner chases along with inexperienced and probably younger horses.

Following a sensible programme of regular schooling Bob's jumping has improved beyond recognition. He now looks fantastic and in Hen's words jumps straight and true and is thoroughly enjoying himself.



Never say never! Bob looking better than he has ever looked.

November 2014

Almost one year on to the day that John McIntyre made the call informing me that Bob had broken down again and this time it looked worse than ever and wondering what shall 'we' should do with him a lot has happened. Bob looks stunning, is happy, settled and is nearly ready to race. Given that John and one other from the original syndicate were keen to re-ignite their active interest in Bob (their background interest never wained) I whole heartily agreed that they could rejoin as part owners and that I was happy for him to run in their original colours. So now we are, with a degree of nervous anticipation, putting into practice a plan of how Bob's racing season will look. We have to plan for what we know now. At present Bob looks fit to race so that is what he will do.

Bob has followed a meticulously thought out incremental, stepwise progression with different aspects of exercise and activities identified and outlined months in advance to ensure that there was a chance that the targeted objective would have more than a fair chance of happening. In my view it is not down to luck, but the result of an intelligent and considered programme assisted by the in-put of people who understand their craft.

I am convinced horses like Bob and many others we treat at Tendonology carry a defective set of genes which means they have a predisposition to premature degenerative tendon pathology. Nature will pay a significant part in Bob's future but this programme has been planned to defy the inevitable or at least manage the condition to delay it. We know that many racehorses present with this problem so a careful and individually tailored management at present is the only realistic way to ensure these talented horses can continue enjoy fruitful racing careers. With Bob time will tell. However, if all goes to plan his racing programme is clear in my head for the coming months until he is ready to come home again and enjoy being one of the family again.



Bob: Looking and feeling good.

January 2015

D-day, January 13th 2015 closing date for entries for the Ladbrokes World Hurdle and given a rating of 140 -145 and Bob's in. Here's to March 12th The Ladbrokes World Hurdle which is the feature race on day three of the 2015 Cheltenham Festival. The World Hurdle is for the stayers as the distance is the only 3 mile hurdle race and this is very much a specialist race for the staying hurdlers. The Ladbrokes World Hurdle is hurdlers version of the Chasers Cheltenham Gold Cup and has grown in stature over the past few years.

The Cheltenham World Hurdle has produced three horses in the last decade who have dominated this race in Inglis Drever who won for a third time in 2008, Baracouda and of course Big Buck's, who won the race four times during his career.

Bob will have one under distance race before heading off to Cheltenham where we can begin to dare to dream of him powering up the Cheltenham Hill to win in style.

February 2015

3m1/2 f of Newbury's turf was the plan and on 7th February after all the waiting the time came. Bob looked great and clearly remembered what a racecourse was for. Leading for much of the early part of the race he looked comfortable and relaxed. Turning into the last bend after 2.5 miles covered he suddenly and dramatically slowed and was pulled up evidently not happy.

After all the thought, planning, work and effort Bob's tendon was just not up to the task and failed again. Off to vets to have the obligatory ton of wading and back home with the obvious and burning question; what now?

May 2015

Bob's well, settled back at home and I think pleased to be back. What now? ; let's see, definitely the summer off then see where we are. The attached video shows he's very mobile still and never say never. A flat race first race back though. Watch this space.

David Chapman-Jones, May 2015

