



Pipped at the Post: Remembering Racing's Runners-Up by Alice Jaques-Giddens

There is no place like the winner's circle after a major race. A thrill fills the air as whoops of victory descend on horse, rider, trainer, owner and grooms alike. For the jockeys, the adrenaline rush, the relief, the accomplishment, a few grateful words to reporters before being swept along on the ecstasy of a life-defining win. For the horses, a well-earned cooldown, a winner's rug, perhaps laurels and adoring pats. Once the crowds subside and horses loaded are on to lorries to return to their yards, their names are etched in history. The Cheltenham Gold Cup winner, the Epsom Derby victor, and of course the Grand National champion: these horses and their riders are never forgotten.

But what of those who came second? Remembering his photo finish in the 2012 Grand National aboard Neptune Collonges, jockey Daryl Jacob told *Sporting Life* of his agonising wait for the result: "I was just praying and hoping... it felt like a lifetime.... I just kept thinking I don't want to be on the losing side." In Jacob's case, and thanks to what he calls Neptune's "big nose that he got down just at the right time", victory was snatched on the final stride. For Sonnyhillboy and his jockey Richie McLernon he had lost the National by the shortest head in the race's history. "It was gut-wrenching," McLernon told *The Irish Post*, "I've gone over it thousands of times in my head. Finishing second in the Grand National – if someone had offered me that beforehand I'd have grabbed it with both hands – but there and then I was absolutely gutted."

Sonnyhillboy's Grand National hopes ended on that day and he never returned to Aintree. For other horses, a near-victory served as prelude to legendary wins. L'Escargot finished third in the 1973 Grand National and moved up to second in 1974, both times beaten by Red Rum and jockey Brian Fletcher. Yet L'Escargot went on to prevent Red Rum from earning a third consecutive National win when he finally took the race in 1975 under jockey Tommy Carberry. Red Rum, himself now pipped, was runner-up again in 1976 behind winner Rag Trade before regaining his crown (and becoming the only triple winner of the race) in 1977 with jockey Tommy Slack. Red Rum's seconds in three of his five consecutive National runs highlight his incredible consistency, finishing in the top two in all his National starts, whilst L'Escargot's climb through the places to snatch victory from his rival is a story of extraordinary perseverance.

These tales of eventual triumph celebrate talent and tenacity. Others are more heart-breaking. In 1973, the American racehorse Sham ran the fastest Kentucky Derby in the race's history. Unfortunately, another horse ran it fastest still on the very same day, with Secretariat finishing two and a half lengths ahead of him. In any other outing, Sham's race would have seen him crowned the victor. His other two triple crown races told a similar story; Sham came second to Secretariat in the Preakness Stakes and was outpaced by him in the Belmont. Fated to be eclipsed by the greatness of Secretariat, Sham's story is a tragedy of bad timing.

Racehorses only get a handful of chances at a major race, but elite jockeys often have multiple high-stake attempts. Careers in racing can thus be shaped as much by near-misses as victories. Richard Johnson, one of the most successful jockeys in racing history, also holds the record for the highest number of Grand National rides without a win. His impressive 21 starts include two second-place finishes, yet speaking to *The Standard* Johnson observed that "No one remembers who finishes second... just a case of so near, so far." With 3819 career wins, Johnson's Grand National misses might be better termed glitches than loses.

To come second in a major race is a bitter pill, but being pipped at the post tells as important a story as being crowned victor. If winners are written into history, perhaps second-placers are mythology. In the stories of racing's runners-up we find perseverance and poignancy, humility and courage – in short, qualities to prize.