



Oaksey

John Geoffrey Tristram Lawrence, known as John Oaksey

4th Baron Trevethin, 2nd Baron Oaksey

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John Oaksey, who has died aged 83, was the best amateur steeplechase jockey of his era, a talent that he translated into a hugely successful career as a racing journalist, broadcaster and author. Though he rode big-race winners in Taxidermist, Proud Tarquin and Bullocks Horn, his riding career was best remembered for his partnership with a horse that failed to win. Carrickbeg, his mount in the 1963 Grand National, was caught and beaten in the final strides by the 66-1 shot Ayala.

Already he had found a wider role in the sport – four days before the National he was invited by BBC television to fly round the course in a helicopter, describing the fences, and how it feels to ride in the great race. His description of the closing stages, “Round the last elbow into the straight.... The final dregs of stamina are draining fast for horse and man alike. A hundred yards to go and perhaps another’s head appears at his knee, “was replicated to the letter by events on the day. Carrickbeg jumped the last fence in front and led the entire 484 yards of the Aintree run-in until the final strides.

This preview, and his brilliant immediate account of the race for the early editions of the Sunday Telegraph, sealed Oaksey’s future in the media. When a riding accident enforced his retirement from the saddle in 1975, he combined his now prolific journalistic career with work for charitable causes, notably the Injured Jockeys Fund, which, he reflected in 2004, had given him “more pride than any of the other activities in my racing life.”

He was born in London to Marjorie and Geoffrey Lawrence, and his forebears had achieved distinction in the law. As Lord Justice Lawrence, his father presided over the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in 1946. Two years later he was created Lord Oaksey, and became Lord Trevethin upon the death of his older brother. The titles passed to John on his father’s death in 1971.

Although his destiny was always envisaged as being within the family profession, his father suggested that, after Eton, he read philosophy, politics and economics rather than law at New College, Oxford. While there, he rode in several point-to-points, winning his first race at the Pegasus Club meeting in 1951.

After winning an exchange fellowship to the law school at Yale, he returned to Britain to pass all but the final examination for the bar. But then Bill Curling, the Daily Telegraph racing correspondent, offered him a job as his assistant.

The appeal of combining such work with race-riding was irresistible. Oaksey joined the Telegraph and the following year, aged 28, he was given his own column under the pen name Marlborough.

In 1959, he inherited the Audax column in Horse & Hound magazine from the late David Livingstone-Learmonth. It was a weekly duty that he performed with excellence for almost 30 years.

His first regular television work was with Pay-TV, the pay-as-you-view experiment set up by the boxing promoter Jarvis Astaire in 1965. It won the contract to show Kempton Park races from BBC television, but collapsed two years later. From 1969 until the end of his broadcasting career in 2002, Oaksey was employed by ITV and Channel 4. His appeal was universal, combining his first-hand experience as a steeplechase jockey with an affable, good-humoured charm.

Meanwhile, Oaksey's riding (as Mr J Lawrence) went from strength to strength. In 1958 he won the prestigious Imperial Cup at Sandown on Flaming East, the Whitbread Gold Cup at Sandown on Taxidermist, and the Hennessy Gold Cup at Cheltenham on the same horse, a remarkable treble for an amateur rider.

Oaksey's one major race-riding disappointment apart from the Grand National came when Proud Tarquin carried him to a short-head success from The Dickler in the 1974 Whitbread Gold Cup, only to be disqualified for interference. It was widely regarded as a harsh decision, which rankled with Oaksey for the rest of his life. The following year a crashing fall compelled him to end his riding career.

Oaksey was one of the original trustees when the Injured Jockeys Funds was launched in 1964, after two successful and popular National Hunt jockeys, Tim Brookshaw and Paddy Farrell, were paralysed in separate falls at Aintree racecourse. By its 40th anniversary, it had helped more than 1,000 jockeys and their dependents. Oaksey was appointed OBE in 1985 for his services to charity, and played a major role in Bric (the British Racing Industry Council), the Stable Lads Association, Racing Welfare and the Moorcroft Racehorse Welfare Centre.

His personal affairs were not as well regulated. In 1959 he married Tory (Victoria) Dennistoun, daughter of a racehorse trainer, with whom he had a son Patrick, and daughter, Sara, the wife of trainer Mark Bradstock. When the marriage fell apart and Tory left the family home to pursue her career as an artist, Oaksey leant heavily on the hospitality of friends, notably Frank Crocker, a local farmer.

In 1987 Oaksey suggested that Crocker, who was selling his farm, and his wife, Chicky (Rachel), should buy an estate-owned cottage at the end of his drive. Within months, Chicky had left her husband and two children, and moved into Hill Farm to live with Oaksey, whom she married the following year. The episode provoked tabloid headlines, and many of Crocker's wide circle of friends took a long time to forgive him for what they considered ungentlemanly behaviour.

By the time he produced his autobiography in 2003, Oaksey was already suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. Nonetheless, he continued to work tirelessly with his wife for the charities he supported, and in 2009 a newly built retirement complex for injured jockeys in Lambourn, Berkshire, was named Oaksey House in his honour. His latter years were also enhanced by the successes of his steeplechaser Carruthers, trained by his son-in-law, including winning the Hennessy Gold Cup at Newbury last year.

Oaksey is survived by Chicky and his children.

Julian Wilson

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