

FIRST ENCOUNTERS

In conversation with Frances O'Rourke

CIAN O'CONNOR

A showjumper who won a bronze medal at the London Olympics in August, and in the same month he was on the Irish team that won the Aga Khan trophy at the Dublin Horse Show. He trains his horses at his stables, Karlswood, Co Meath

John and I met in Bettystown, Co Meath: my dad owned the Village Hotel and John had the adjoining riding school. Dad had a very good hunting horse, Radiman, and I began to ride him. I was about 14 and John took me under his wing. I really liked the competition side of it, so we concentrated on showjumping. We became close because he saw that I was very enthusiastic and gave his time to help me.

I went to Belvedere College and enjoyed rugby, but wasn't great at it; I played till I was about 15 but the other guys were getting bigger and I wasn't. My first taste of the competitive side of jumping was during hunter trials. Most people take it as a bit of fun but I walked the course the night before with John four times, till I knew every blade of grass, knew where I was going. With Radiman, I won five or six trials one year. That was my first taste of winning.

I finished Belvedere in 1998. I was 18 and through my friend and mentor Gerry Mullins [a former top Irish showjumper] I found Copperalley Stud in Maynooth, owned by businessman John Connolly. He was a very nice guy, gave me some horses to ride. I was running my business from Copperalley, taking in hunters, turning them out, teaching in some local riding clubs.

I always kept in touch with John [Floody]. At that point, he'd come back from the US and I encouraged him to come to Maynooth. We both had yards at Copperalley, and John stayed there until he bought his own place near Slane.

I knew how talented and competitive John was and thought it was a shame he wasn't in showjumping: then he got himself some owners, got going again. You ask anybody, they'll tell you, John wins more classes nationally than any other rider, and has done so consistently on different horses for many years now.

John is one of my closest friends. This sport is a tough business and quite an individual sport, unlike rugby. John and I aren't rivals. We work together, quite often we'll recommend each other's businesses to clients – it's better than sending a customer away. Don't get me wrong: if I was in the lead in the Grand Prix in Cavan, he'd break his neck to beat me – and vice versa.

But I feel John has my back. From time to time I'd need a heads up – John would hear things coming down the track, would tip me off about things I should be aware of.

The best thing about John is his work ethic: he's the hardest worker I know. He never gives up on a horse, he'll work and work to get the best out of them. The worst? When he's drawn behind you in a jump-off – you know you're snookered.

FRIENDS AND RIVALS
Showjumpers Cian O'Connor and John Floody.
PHOTOGRAPH: BARRY CRONIN



I competed as a showjumper until I was 22 or so; after leaving school, I'd trained with Captain Con Power. Then I set up a riding school and equestrian centre in Bettystown, Co Meath, and gave up competing for about 15 years. Showjumping was something I always wanted to do, but it was very difficult in those years, the early 1990s, if you didn't have sponsorship. You had to make money – that's why I set up the riding school.

When Cian came to the school aged 14, he showed unbelievable determination. He made a decision very early on that he wanted to be a showjumper.

He came from a rugby family – his grandfather was Karl Mullen, his godfather Tony O'Reilly – and they probably would have been pushing him a little bit that way, but he wanted to stick with showjumping.

Both of us are very competitive so I was delighted to see him wanting to win all the time. He's shown that same determination and hard work over the past few years. At 15, Cian was the same guy he is now, except he wasn't great at mucking out stables.

I went out to the US for about three years, and came home around 2001. When I came back, I rented the yard beside Cian in Maynooth and decided to give showjumping another go. It was hard to get back in there, but I worked hard at it and got some nice horses and good results.

One was Larkhill Cruiser, a lovely horse who had a funny style of jumping. Cian had him originally but told the owner, Michael Smith, if he wanted to keep him, to bring him to me. He had a brain like a human; we educated him over a few years and he turned into a top-class horse for me. He qualified for the World Breeding Championships and won a class. Last year, for Cian, he jumped clear to help the Irish team win in La Baule. He was a once-in-a-lifetime horse.

I'll always be there for Cian. It's true that he's had dramatic highs and lows over the past 10 years, but he's come back so well. We are rivals when we compete, but I'm more national, Cian's more international. If Cian's in the lead, I'll do my best to try to catch him – although it's not an easy job.

The best thing about Cian? His determination, and his positive outlook on life.

I can see why he's so successful. He has proved it again and again, coming back to win bronze at the Olympics, going to Beijing to ride a horse he'd never sat on before and then win their World Cup qualifier – that shows his talent.

JOHN FLOODY

A showjumper and one of Ireland's top horse producers, John Floody coaches horses and riders at his stables, Newgrange Stud, in Beuparc, Co Meath, where he now lives

