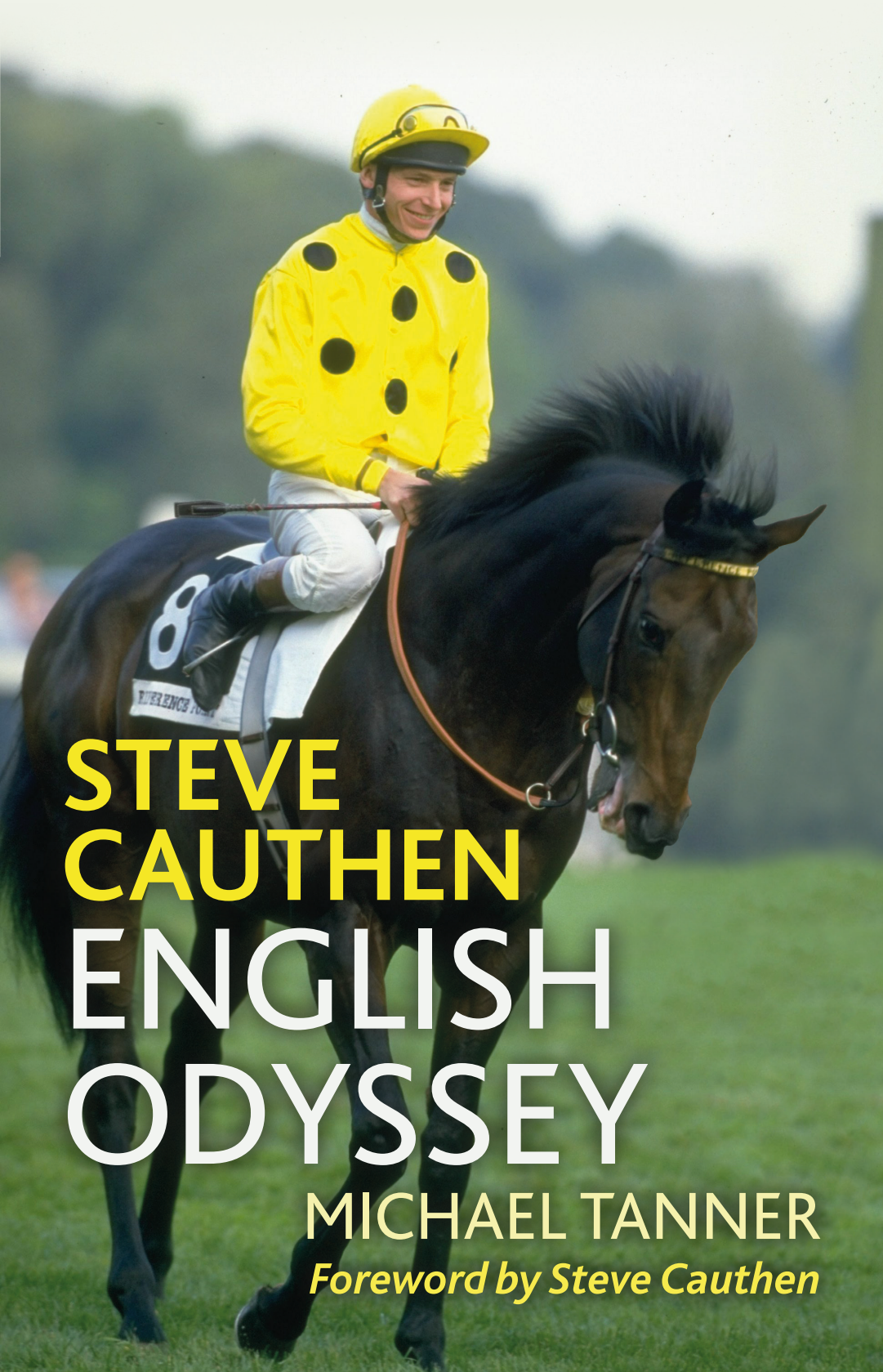

STEVE CAUTHEN
ENGLISH ODYSSEY

MICHAEL TANNER

Foreword by Steve Cauthen

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RACING POST

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FOREWORD

IT CAME as quite a surprise to learn that someone wished to write a book devoted to my English-based career so many years after it ended. But it's kinda cool to know my impact on English racing was thought worthy of being recorded for posterity. And also to learn that the book had been inspired by someone's interest in sectional timing. I wasn't aware the subject was being written about back in England in the 1980s and 90s. Hopefully, people learnt something from watching me ride and judge pace by using the 'clock-in-the-head'.

I feel honoured to think I left something behind in my adopted country: not just the incentive to ride and win races from the front, but also by popularising the 'toe-in-the-iron' riding style that has become so commonplace.

My English career would never have got off the ground without the help of numerous people. This is an opportunity to pay tribute and extend my gratitude to a few of them. Barry and Penny Hills treated me like a son, and I love them both; Jimmy Lindley opened so many doors and educated me in the ways of English racing, without which I'd have been lost; jockeys' agents were novelties in England back in the 1980s, but without the priceless assistance of John Hanmer I'd never have become champion jockey; my drivers John Naughton and John Barnes gave me great company and got me where I needed to go in good order. And I remember fondly absent friends: Robert Sangster put his faith in me to bring me over to England; Pat Eddery

and Walter Swinburn were tough but fair opponents to ride against and brilliant jockeys both. And there's little I can add about Henry Cecil other than remind everybody what a genius he was with horses and what a loyal supporter he was of me.

Michael's well-researched telling of my 14 seasons in England is informative and entertaining; and he's demonstrated its importance to me by setting it beside the American career I left behind.

I hope readers will enjoy re-living the old days as much as I have being reminded of them.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN CAESAR boasted 'veni, vidi, vici,' he left us one of the most familiar Latin phrases. 'I came, I saw, I conquered' celebrated his subjugation of the Bosporan Kingdom of northern Turkey at the Battle of Zela in 47BC. One hopes the dictator won't take umbrage from beyond the funeral pyre, however, if his declaration is put into the third person singular to salute Steve Cauthen's conquest of the English Turf in the last quarter of the 20th century.

For not since Tod Sloan revolutionised race-riding in England 100 years earlier had an American jockey carved out an imperishable legacy like Cauthen. Sloan brought with him a new style of riding and racing that exposed flaws in our jockeys. Not for him a policeman's seat: he crouched and hid behind his horse's neck, a low and streamlined seat promoting greater speed. And he caught our riders napping by forcing the pace from the gate instead of joining them in the English fashion of dawdling and coming with a late rush. However, fashions changed and, though not so exaggerated as of old, English races again became characterised by lack of early pace during the passage of the 20th century. The eye-catching foreign input came from Australians such as Scobie Breasley and Ron Hutchinson; but nobody tried to replicate their quiet 'bobbing' finesse. Steve Cauthen's arrival in 1979, however, was akin to the second coming of Tod Sloan. Cauthen's back was so low and flat one could barely spot him from head-on: his legs and trunk angled like a human paper clip. And

confident in his ability to judge pace to his benefit and the detriment of others, he revived the art of winning from the front. By the time he retired in 1992 his trademark seat and his willingness to employ forcing tactics had been adopted in one way or another by virtually every leading jockey in the country. Truly: he came, he saw, he conquered.

Any fan of the Turf had heard of Steve Cauthen before his arrival. He was 'Stevie Wonder'; 'The Six Million Dollar Man'; 'The Kentucky Kid', who'd taken American racing by storm as a teenager; for two years he was hotter than the hinges of Hell until a 110-ride streak of losers plunged him to the brink of a professional abyss. But in my case a deep interest in his talents developed once I began clocking and writing about sectional times in the mid-1980s. One came to appreciate more fully the uncanny gifts of this supremely talented jockey. The clock became the prism through which Cauthen's talents might be assessed as objectively as the smoothness of his riding style pleased the naked eye. Sectional times were our magnifying glass.

Clocking the component sections of a race was virtually unheard of in England BC – 'Before Cauthen'. In fact, race times overall were not accorded much respect: the only 'time' that matters, suggested one Turf sage, is 'time spent in jail'. Time comparisons of any kind were perceived next to useless owing to the disparate topography – the cambers, switchbacks and undulations – that lent so much character to English tracks. That more enlightened Turf nations – France, Australia, Hong Kong, Japan et al – flashed electronically clocked sectional times onto television screens and trackside teletimers during races to enable spectators and viewers to judge how fast or slow a race was unfolding, and how their wager might cope with either, cut no ice in England. These times would then be printed in the following day's trade papers, such as America's *Daily Racing Form* or France's *Paris Turf*, for more leisurely analysis. But in England it was as if such information didn't exist or didn't matter. That is, until the deeds of Steve Cauthen shook up the English Turf media and made it pay attention.

Nowhere was sectional timing more part and parcel of the racing game than across the Atlantic where American horse-players – on and off track – paid heed to the mantra 'Pace makes the race.' And to judge the pace accurately it had to be recorded along the lines of lap-timing in track athletics. On the race-track this involved timing every quarter (two furlongs) and occasionally one furlong (towards the finish). The barometer of pace was 'even time' – a quarter in 24 seconds. The resultant splits or fractions, as they became known, promoted an understanding of how a race was run – e.g. a gallop slower than even time prompted a late sprint for the line by animals with plenty left in reserve; a taxing gallop favoured the stamina-laden by eliminating the likelihood of a sprint finish. Astute students of the data were able to identify the preferred running style of a horse – its running profile: a 'grinder' enjoyed a strong gallop; a 'kicker' or a 'closer' preferred deploying a burst of late acceleration off a slower pace. Nowhere in sport might the maxim 'knowledge is power' be demonstrated to better financial effect.

American racehorses are barned and trained at the tracks on which they are about to run, which, thanks to them being homogenous, flat, left-handed dirt ovals, facilitates time comparisons for both workouts and races. To this end, American apprentices – 'bug boys' – grow into fully fledged jockeys, having had the lessons outlined in the previous paragraph engrained into them by riding to the clock during work in the morning and races in the afternoon; if a trainer instructs a work rider to go 'four-eighths in 52', he'd better get his mount to complete those four furlongs in 52 seconds or face a volley of abuse. And every track possessed a 'Clockers Corner', a vantage point where assorted rail-birds – jockeys' agents and speed handicappers, hustlers and 'hardboots' – gathered every morning to get a heads-up on the hand-clocked workouts destined to appear in *Daily Racing Form*.

Such was the racing environment in which Steve Cauthen matured from bug boy to a 17-year-old champion jockey in less than two seasons. That he made the transition so rapidly brought super-stardom. And switching

from Eastern Standard Time to British Summer Time didn't cause much disruption to the 'clock in his head'. Of course, the concept of even time needed revision, owing to the physical diversity of the tracks he now faced: a 24-second quarter on an undulating track like Epsom or Goodwood described a different pace to a flat one like Chester or York. Cauthen soon got to grips with the problem. And solved it.

It quickly became apparent to English racegoers that Cauthen rarely, if ever, misjudged a mount's running profile. And, more importantly, he seldom, if ever, misjudged the pace; it was as if Cauthen had the finest chronometer ticking away under his skull cap. No finer juxtaposition of this acuity may be found than in a pair of Group Ones at Royal Ascot in 1990 run over the Old Mile: he won the St James's Palace Stakes on Shavian by making every yard and then added the Coronation Stakes on Chimes of Freedom after lying off the pace and coming late. If any rider deserved to be nicknamed 'Nobody' it was Steve Cauthen. Why? Because 'Nobody's perfect'.

The American possessed other qualities that set him aside from his colleagues in English weighing rooms from 1979 to 1992; for one, hands looking more suited to holding a pick-axe instead of a set of reins down which the rider transmits the most sensitive of messages, belied their heft to gossamer effect. Yet Cauthen's understanding of pace was his most sublime trait. Consequently, Cauthen became a God-send to the various columns based on sectional timing that I contributed to Turf newspapers and periodicals. On English tracks, however, the fractions had to be hand-timed, usually reinforced with the aid of video recordings. Some derided my efforts at bringing the subject to wider attention. But when the message is worth communicating it's worth persevering. Eventually the naysayers began singing from my hymn sheet.

In that early land of the blind, the one-eyed man could be king. Even hand-timed fractions gave the watch-holder some objective idea of race rhythm; notably, whereabouts came the telling injection of pace that settled the destiny of Group races, the battleground for elite performers who

tended to play tactical games of cat and mouse – as opposed to handicaps habitually truly run from gate to line. One of the sport's biggest outfits recognised the value of the data quicker than most, regularly seeking assurance how a particular Group race had been run and whether their horse had shown itself to be a 'grinder' or a 'kicker'. The discussion about future tactics invariably ended with questions such as: 'Do we need a pacemaker to force the pace for a grinder or one to slow it down for a kicker?' or 'When should we inject pace into the race to expose any vulnerabilities in rivals X or Y?'

In 1997, thanks to the good offices of Brough Scott and Andrew Franklin, *Channel 4 Racing* chose to involve me in showcasing sectional timing. Over a number of seasons I'd stand alongside Graham Goode or Simon Holt in the commentator's booth for Group One events and act as their personal teletimer, letting them know the splits and whether that meant the pace was fast or slow – the various repercussions of which we'd discussed beforehand. That, to me, was fulfilling the main aim of sectional timing: objective information in running.

Sectional timing drew greater attention, however, when its financial implications became apparent thanks to the 1997 Eclipse Stakes. I asserted odds-on Bosra Sham, the new star in the firmament following stunning successes in the Guineas, Champion Stakes and, freshest in the memory, the Prince of Wales's Stakes at Royal Ascot, could be overturned in a five-runner renewal. Her fractions suggested she was a grinder. Compromised by a pedestrian gallop, I argued, she could be exposed. And that's what happened: Pilsudski, at the remunerative odds of 11/2, beat her by two lengths – an against-the-odds prediction that led to Brough conducting a live *Channel 4* dissection of the race with me. Five weeks later, the runes were again read accurately in a four-runner Juddmonte International. Once more Bosra Sham was odds-on and running without a pacemaker. Might she force the pace this time? Singspiel's running profile suggested he could cope with that, and prevail if it came to a sprint down the long York straight. Singspiel beat her by four lengths into last place – at equally rewarding odds of 4/1.

A suitably impressed John McCririck, always quick to bestow a moniker, instantly christened me 'Mystic Mike'.

Two from two spoke well of sectional times as an aid to winner finding. But it's no more than an aid. Ground, wind strength and direction, positioning of running rails and weight carried must all be factored into the equation when assessing their true value. And racehorses are athletes not robots; there's a limit to quantifying body and soul – particularly when the athlete in question is deaf and dumb to any entreaties. Above all, the jockey must be able to read the pace and adjust to its ramifications for his mount, quite literally, on the hoof. Once the gates slam open he's on his own. Judgement and coolness are the only currency with any value now. And you could bank on Steve Cauthen. He was as safe as the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street.

That example of Bosra Sham becomes relevant to this work because, although not partnered by Cauthen, she was trained by Henry Cecil on whose horses Cauthen demonstrated his acute awareness of pace during a six-year tenure as stable jockey at Warren Place. It was a rare column of mine that did not extol the accuracy of the clock in Steve's head: 'Classy Cauthen' was the headline to one piece that pinpointed the 'outstanding tactician currently performing in these islands.' Another ventured to say: 'We have not seen his peer at the art of winning from the front – Lester Piggott included.'

And didn't things change when Cauthen vacated the track in 1992. As the 1993 Derby approached I found myself lamenting his absence in the *Sporting Life Weekender* under the headline 'Missing You, Cauthen.' Back in the 1920s, I mused, the cry of 'Come on, Steve!' used to fill the air when the Derby came around. In 1993 the exaltation could've been amended to 'Come back, Steve!' – for Donoghue, read Cauthen. You see, a recurring trait had blighted the season's middle-distance Pattern races: a marked lack of pace that did scant justice to their race description. When Cauthen was around, I reminded readers you could put money on this rarely, if ever, being the case. But in his absence the middle-distance category had been replete with instances of woefully tentative early pace. Was this

merely coincidental? Or were we gathering abundant evidence to support the hypothesis that our jockeys lacked the fine judgement of pace frequently found in their American counterparts? Did they lack sufficient confidence to show initiative in this respect?

There's no question riding a winning race from the front is a far more difficult proposition than riding one from behind. Even if the leader is left to its own devices, the jockey must judge pace to perfection; he has no other horse in sight by which he may gauge pace. All he has is the 'clock in his head'. And he's a sitting duck for opponents stalking him; they can tuck in while he takes the strain, physically and psychologically. They can see him; but he's no wing mirrors to check what they're about. Alternatively, he may be hassled along faster than he wants, owing to the presence of a horse upsides; possibly a rival put in the race deliberately to make him compete to exhaustion. Preventing a rush of blood to the head from inciting a false move during the cauldron of battle consequently demands of any jockey colossal sang-froid. And the blood flowing through Cauthen's veins as the bugle sounded wasglacial.

I confessed to having lost count of the numerous occasions I'd been afforded just cause to attribute a victory to the so-called 'clock' in Cauthen's head – a veritable Rolex among a tray of Mickey Mouse timepieces. The majority of Group One races over a mile and a half will see at least one pacemaker in the field that can afford to sacrifice itself, I argued, with few or no questions asked regarding 'running on its merits'. But Cauthen's acute sense of pace made a pace-making stable-mate superfluous: in the 241 renewals of the Derby up to 2020 there have only been eight certain instances of the winner making virtually every yard of the running – two of those successes stand to the peerless American within the space of three years.

Steve Cauthen, unlike Caesar, was no braggart. He was an unassuming champion; modesty became him. Often he confessed to feeling uneasy being labelled some kind of 'god' just because he won horseraces. Nevertheless, to us rail-birds there was something joyous about watching how Cauthen

applied the guile and the horse supplied the power to leave us believing in centaurs. He dazzled us with talents based on an acute understanding of the thoroughbred and its foibles that only materialises when horseman and jockey are one and the same – which is not always the case. Few bar the Philistine would deny the sight of a running horse being one of the most beautiful and stirring sights in the natural world; any human impediment to that vision is as ugly as it is unwelcome. Watching Cauthen on a thoroughbred racehorse was to gaze upon a thing of beauty: his streamlined aerodynamic crouch so low that from head-on he could barely be spotted tucked away behind his animal's neck; his flat back tantamount to a second skin atop its hide; his toe-tips caressing the irons with the delicacy of a raindrop on a blade of grass. Thus did we appreciate the transatlantic mantra 'down low and go for dough!' And understand why one Belmont regulare swore, 'You could serve drinks on the Kid's back at the furlong marker and you wouldn't spill a drop before he hits the wire.'

Yes, the image of Steve Cauthen on a thoroughbred racehorse came as close to perfection as rationality allows. He once acknowledged that opinion in his own quiet way: 'The horse is such a beautiful animal, when you're on him, in control of him, moving with him as one, it's a beautiful feeling. And the best is when you're almost getting him to know what you want to do.'

The extraordinary thing was Cauthen made the extraordinary happen so regularly the extraordinary seemed normal. It made watching him constantly instructive and infinitely pleasurable. He may or may not have been a genius – whatever that means – in the saddle. But if he was a genius, he was one of the few of that ilk both intelligent and articulate enough to give us some explanation as to how he worked his wonders. During his 'English Odyssey' it's safe to assert he gave more pre-race prognostication and post-race analysis on live television than all his weighing-room colleagues put together. For that alone the English race-goer must give thanks because many of our great jockeys burdened with 'genius' down the centuries, from George Fordham and Fred Archer to Lester Piggott and Pat Eddery, have struggled to translate their philosophy or methodology into words. But it

is Steve Cauthen's words that provide the warp to the weft provided by sectional timing throughout this book.

We in England may not have claimed Steve Cauthen as one of our own for long, but for as long as it lasted it was a blast of fresh air. And that's why it demanded recording in print.

Venit, vidit, vicit.

PROLOGUE

IN EARLY 1979 three friends were chatting over a meal in a Newbury Italian restaurant. One was an owner – and a leading owner at that with racehorses and cash a-plenty. The second was a trainer who handled three dozen of his horses. And the third was a former jockey. The diners were Robert Sangster, Barry Hills and Jimmy Lindley. Over pasta and red wine, this was the triumvirate who brought about Steve Cauthen's 'English Odyssey'.

Jimmy Lindley takes up the story. 'Barry had rung me and said Robert was coming over and we should meet for lunch. During the course of the meal Robert said he was fed up with changing jockeys in mid-stream because it wasn't good for decent horses not to have a good jockey all the time. George Blackwell, the bloodstock agent, had been staying with us and had been talking of this kid in America. It had gone through one ear and out the other at the time. But in the restaurant the bell went in my head and I suggested Steve. Barry said, "If he's that good he'll stay in America." I said, "Not necessarily, you've a card up your sleeve because he's getting a bit heavy for over there." And, he might be ready for a change because at the time Steve was going through a bad patch, a losing streak he'd never experienced before. He'd go a month without riding a winner. The next day Robert rang me and said, "Go and get on a f***ing plane and get him." They paid for me to go over and put the proposition to Steve in person.'

Sangster had approached Cauthen before. The previous summer he'd needed a jockey for Hawaiian Sound in the Derby. Though flattered,

Cauthen felt it wouldn't be fair to everyone concerned with his Kentucky Derby and Preakness Stakes winner Affirmed if he accepted, as there were only a couple of days difference between the Derby and the Belmont Stakes, the third leg of the American Triple Crown. The mount went to Bill Shoemaker. 'The Shoe' almost pulled off a miracle: trying to make every yard of the running only to be grabbed on the line by Shirley Heights. Now Sangster sensed he might get his man.

Lindley's visit afforded him first-hand experience of an American sporting phenomenon. 'I rang the Cauthen farm and arranged to meet Steve in the coffee bar at my Lexington hotel. I had never met him and when the kid walked in wearing a pair of jeans and sneakers, that was it! Wham! I thought it was bloody Frank Sinatra. Everyone was going mad. Women were rushing up and saying, "Can I have your autograph for my daughter?" I put the positives to him; assured him that he'd benefit from our higher weights, an extra 5lb or so that he might use to his advantage. He asked me to come for lunch the next day at the farm to meet his parents, Tex and Myra. It was like real old America, with even a hound dog on the veranda. I came back and was able to tell Barry that I thought we had a chance of getting him.'

> Robert Sangster came over and asked to have dinner with my father and I, and offered me the job. At dinner he said, 'You'll need to ride in England eventually because of your weight – so why not come now.' It was obvious to him that I was still growing. He struck me as very genuine and a nice guy to be around and I could sense he was a winner, and that's the kind of person you want to be around in the racing game.
>
> After I'd given it some thought, I realised what he'd said was true and, talking with my dad, decided it was a great opportunity. Jimmy had explained that he would be trying to help me with handling the different courses and in any way that I needed. I thought I had nothing to lose and everything to gain and that if it didn't work out I could come back.

> God presents us with things. He runs the show. I don't run the show. For whatever reason, I took it that going to England was obviously something that was maybe meant to happen. I came over thinking I'd try it for a month and then go back if I didn't like it. But it turned out I had the best job in England.

The negotiations were handled by Sangster's Californian 'fixer', Los Angeles-based Ulsterman Billy Macdonald, managing director of International Horse Broker Limited. Macdonald was a charmer of the first order whose claims to fame allegedly included being engaged no fewer than seven times, selling the record number of Rolls Royces in one day and being a buddy of Frank Sinatra. With that pedigree as a 'spieler' *par excellence,* there was only going to be one outcome of his discussions with Cauthen's parents. 'Steve thought this would be a wonderful time to race in Europe,' said Myra Cauthen. 'It would be a learning experience. It would be different if he had some stakes horses going for him here but Steve has nothing to hold him back. Racing right as well as left-handed? He races in both directions out in our pasture so that'll be no problem.'

News of Cauthen's defection caused quite a stir. 'Cauthen's decision surprises his agent' was the headline in the *New York Times* in the wake of Cauthen breaking the news to the Press at Santa Anita on 23 February; Harry 'The Hat' Hacek, it reported, had only heard about his client's new job from the television. The contract was duly signed on 24 February. It involved a retainer rumoured to be of £100,000 plus a share in every colt winning a Group race and 7.5 per cent of their prize-money; and 15 per cent for fillies likewise successful. Cauthen has insisted the retainer was less than half that amount, but, in any case, he knew very well he had to justify himself 'by earning a great deal more'. Whatever the precise amount, Sangster and his seven partners (who included Sheikh Mohammed, Prince Khalid Abdulla and Tony Shead) could afford it.

The 'English Odyssey' destined to bequeath Cauthen's adopted country a legacy beyond rubies was about to begin. It would last 14 seasons. And

leave us with infinite memories. Not just memories of great horses given great rides to win great races. Cauthen stamped his presence with something indelible. It's with us every day of the Flat-racing season. By the time he retired in 1992 our up-and-coming riders had watched and taken the hint. Some took to riding in California during the winter to acquire a 'clock-in-the-head' of their own. Champion jockeys such as Frankie Dettori and Kieren Fallon reaped the benefit from working horses on the track to time. Others followed; with the result that our riders are far less wary nowadays of making the pace. Winning from the front is a challenge no longer dodged. And as for style: 'Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,' according to that noted literary 'stylist' Oscar Wilde. The Cauthenesque 'toe-in-the-iron' has inspired so many copy-cats as to become the norm.

Cauthen's legacy was not built in a day. To appreciate its evolution we must resist the temptation for undue haste. For gaining genuine understanding of any Homeric exploit demands we delve into its origins besides chronicling its narrative. Homer, for example, might divide Cauthen's story into four *cantos*: Rise: Fall: Redemption: Acclamation. The 'English Odyssey' encompasses parts two and three. To put the scale of their impact into perspective, however, we must explore the depths plumbed in the second *canto*, and demonstrate how extreme they were by referencing the astonishing feats that preceded them.

Thus did an eventful journey bring Cauthen to our shores. Its long and winding course came by way of New York and California. But it began in that bluegrass country where the thoroughbred racehorse walks tallest. It began in Kentucky.

ONE

THE RISE AND FALL OF 'STEVIE WONDER'

ONE DAY in the late 1970s, so the story goes, a reporter who arrived in Lexington, Kentucky, searching for the Walton home of Steve Cauthen was advised: 'Just drive about 70 miles up the Interstate and look at the sky – there's a star in the East.'

Cauthen may not have been born in a stable, but his parents most certainly knew their way around one; and the emergence of their jockey prodigy would be looked upon as nothing short of divine intervention. He came out of nowhere. He looked like a cherub in a Titian fresco. He wore a halo of innocence that made you think he'd fallen from a cloud. And he was destined to perform his own kind of miracle from the back of racehorses.

Stephen Mark Cauthen weighed in for the first time on Sunday, 1 May 1960 at 7lb and 'change'. The latter 12oz most likely accounted for the clock and metronome stored for future usage; while any gifts from three kings surely numbered soft hands, exquisite balance and an equine empathy that found its finest expression on the backs of thoroughbred racehorses. His birthplace was Covington, a small place 80 miles north of Louisville, Kentucky. He would be the eldest of three brothers born to Ronald 'Tex' Cauthen and Myra Bischoff. His birth did not create headlines. That month they were dominated by the shooting down by the

Russians of an American U2 'spy-plane' and the resultant fizzling out of a summit meeting between the two countries.

Cauthen's future, however, did seem foretold in the stars. Anyone who has ever sat on a horse of any description knows how daunting it feels to be stuck on the back of another living creature with a will of its own far above terra firma. And the prospect of sitting on half a ton of thoroughbred capable of going from 0 to 42mph in six strides that take all of 2.5 seconds at any signal from its passenger (deliberate or accidental) does not bear thinking about for the majority of the population. The infant Steve Cauthen was not among the lily-livered. The blood coursing through his veins amounted to equine positive. The army trained Tex as a meteorologist but he'd completed a deferred course in Michigan State University's blacksmith programme and was now a $27-a-job farrier; Myra was a licensed trainer. Their first-born was perched on a horse before he was out of diapers and rode his first pony when most infants would be concentrating on keeping a tricycle upright; saw his first Kentucky Derby aged three; and was a kid on the backstretch when Majestic Prince won in 1969 and his mother was given a rose from his winner's blanket. Aged six, he was flicking flies off horses for his father as he shoed them and was receiving $4 a week from his mother (that went into the bank) to muck stalls and put horses out to pasture each morning. Two years later he got a horse of his own, but only on the condition he did everything for it: brushing, rubbing and picking feet; cleaning and filling the water tub and cutting out a flake or two of hay; forking soiled straw; and applying poultices to any wound – each and every task defined by the sweet musk of horseflesh and the pungent whiff of horse urine. And in all weather. No boy ever grew up in rural Kentucky without learning how the cow ate the corn: the youngster learned to appreciate the easy way by learning things the hard way.

When their eldest son was five, the Cauthens had relocated 20 miles south to a 40-acre farm at the southern end of Main Street in Walton (population 1,600; biggest building its High School), close to the Cincinnati area racetracks of River Downs and Latonia (subsequently rebranded as

Belterra Park and Turfway Park respectively). Here, to the background clatter of passing freight trains, there was room to breed the horses on which the youngster might learn to ride. Father often took his son on his blacksmith rounds to track and trainers. It was during one such visit that a seven-year-old Cauthen performed his first sleight of hand by accepting Lonnie Abshire's tongue-in-cheek invitation to ride the stroppiest animal in his barn, one Slade by name.

Those present experienced what might best be described as an equestrian epiphany. Much the same as no less a personage as Queen Victoria experienced a century earlier when renowned Ohio horse tamer John Solomon Rarey was invited to Windsor Castle to work his magic on the monarch's most ill-tempered animal. Rarey had a quiet way of pacifying even the most obstreperous of horses with kindness instead of brutality: he placed his hands on Her Majesty's horse, coaxed it to the ground and, to everyone's astonishment, lay down beside it and used the hooves that were usually thrashing with hostility for a pillow. Then Rarey heard about Cruiser. Once a decent enough racer to run second in the Criterion Stakes, he was now a six-year-old stallion of such bulging black-eyed fury that he was forced to wear an 8lb iron muzzle to prevent him attacking anyone who entered his stone-walled prison of a box. However, after a three-hour visitation from this American horse 'whisperer', the erstwhile savage was led out minus muzzle and mental scars, as placid as a geriatric sheep. Rarey took Cruiser back to America and they toured the country giving demonstrations of what kindness and insight could do: so compliant did Cruiser become he'd even lie down on Rarey's command.

What ensued in Abshire's barn would've pleased Rarey. It was as if this slight seven-year-old boy had read his book *The Complete Horse Tamer* from cover to cover and absorbed every word. Slade bared his teeth at the boy. The youngster bared his in reply. But his pearly-whites were revealed by a broad smile as he walked the half-ton of snorting equine round Abshire's shed row to the trainer's absolute bewilderment. Stevie could understand how kids might be scared of some things but it never occurred to him that might

include horses. It was as simple as any 'nuts and bolts' job: if the rider's nuts, the horse bolts. For brute strength wasn't the only, or the best, way to handle an unruly horse. A cool head and soothing words work better than a short temper and a long stick when you're dealing with an animal 20 times bigger and stronger. You had to be cute. The kid had the gift. Just like Rarey. Tex Cauthen realised he'd a child prodigy on his hands. He and Abshire had just witnessed the birth of a horseman extraordinaire. 'He could ride everything that moved,' said Tex Cauthen. 'And even some things that didn't.'

But like most all-American boys, Stevie loved sports of all kinds. He yearned to be a quarterback for an NFL team as he idolised Johnny Unitas of the Baltimore Colts. But the summer he came back from vacation to discover all his pals had grown six to eight inches and he had not he realised he was not going to be physically cut out for football. Conversely, he might be small enough to become a jockey. Some deep thinkers swear we become who we're going to be upon attaining a dozen years. Cauthen had just made 12.

It made sense. He'd thought about being a lawyer or a doctor: he reckoned it was possible because he was very focused. But he'd been around horses all his life and the dream came alive in his mind. That road became his choice and he'd concentrate on it. However, at this stage it was only *maybe* he could do this. Tex and some of his friends appreciated the kid had something on a horse – a feel and a balance – and they knew his determination would stand him in good stead. Horses became his lifeblood. Most Kentucky kids his age wanted nothing more than to 'hang out': go to the movies; run around in cars. But all that bored him. Cauthen listened to his father, who drilled into him the maxim: 'If you find something you love to do, you'll never have to work another day in your life.' Steve reckoned he had found it.

Tex Cauthen vowed to help his son achieve his aim on the condition he agreed to concede defeat if it ever came to starving himself to satisfy the scales and that he'd never get swollen-headed if it brought success. The pact was made and the gifts from God were polished by countless hours of practice and refinement. The reins, for example, are the telephone

lines through which the jockey talks to the horse. The large hands of the blacksmith's son may at first glance be suggestive of nothing more than finding restraint facile, but they belied an equal facility for transmitting 'sweet nuthins'. Tex Cauthen enlisted the help of his friend Jackie Flinchem, a former jockey renowned for his exquisite 'hands'; rising at 4am, Steve would spend two hours astride a bale of hay flicking a set of reins attached to the wall until they became extensions to his fingers; and swishing a whip in either hand until there were wisps of golden debris carpeting the floor and he could flick the whip to within a hair of where he aimed it. He lifted weights for strength and did yoga exercises to keep his limbs supple enough for him to stretch in the saddle and hit his mount freely. During the summer he'd then head to the track and the den of cacophony that doubled as the clockers' stand until he could recognise a 12-second furlong when he saw it, and replicate it or variations on it: the 'clock in the head' was being wound. Picking up tips from stall handlers about how to avoid screwing up at the gate, and visiting the camera patrol shed in the afternoons and poring over race film of an evening, developed an appreciation of how races might be won or lost by adopting the right or wrong position and asking your mount for its effort at the right or wrong time. And, above all, the youngster kept asking questions. There were always new ideas to ponder, fresh minds to pick. 'It's the feet, the hands and the head that matter,' stressed Tex Cauthen. 'That's the balance. They all go together.'

So, while his peers were still languishing abed and the rising sun reddened the dirt of Latonia's backstretch, 12-year-old Steve Cauthen began exercising thoroughbred racehorses. Morning track lore was soaked up like a sponge: trot clockwise on the outer; 'breeze' or gallop anticlockwise up the middle; a 'blowout' was shorter and faster than a 'pipeopener'. His first task was to take Abshire's Be a Saint an easy three furlongs in around 40 seconds. Some jockeys will admit to counting the seconds under their breath. To Cauthen, however, the learning process was more matter of fact. Observation. Replication. Application. The 'clock in the head' now appreciated perpetual motion. The clocker's watch stopped at 39.50. 'The

Kid' knew what he was doing. Four decades later he puts into words how this came about:

> I'd watched horses work and soon learned to distinguish an 11-second furlong from a 12-second furlong and I was able to transfer that awareness onto the back of the horse when I began riding work myself. I'd be told to work a horse in 11 and two fifths and I could guarantee doing it. If I didn't, I'd get a rollicking!
>
> There are a lot of things to take into account in gauging time. You need to know what kind of horse you're on, his stride pattern, how much ground he's covering. For example, it would be much harder effort for a $5,000 claimer to run a 12-second furlong than a stakes horse.
>
> It's hard to explain. But I seemed to have an innate ability to judge it. I suppose I was blessed. But I give my father credit for everything I learned. How to get a good seat and hands. Pace. How to switch the stick in one stride. The basics came from him.

Whilst absorbing one set of laws another was being broken: Cauthen was underage. Fortunately the authorities turned a blind eye. Their Nelsonian touch ensured that when Cauthen turned 16 he'd be able to go on and do what he wanted to do more readily. Every ounce of the teenager's energy was poured into realising the dream which his heart insisted he could do. Noting his son's burgeoning enthusiasm, Tex Cauthen took him to doctors to discuss any potential weight problems because he didn't want his son's dreams of becoming a jockey to be dashed cruelly. For a small boy he had huge hands and feet; but there was no way anyone could tell whether, or how, he'd grow. However, one thing was certain: by the time he made 14 Cauthen's 'apprenticeship' around the 'Cincy' tracks was complete. The two years until he became eligible for a jockey's licence couldn't pass

quickly enough. The first sit, the first 'breeze' had all come and gone. He'd paid his dues. He was ready. 'The Kid', as the rail-birds dubbed him, was a natural. Three days after his 16th birthday, Tex took his son to see Kentucky racing steward Keene Dangerfield to ask for a licence. The teenager was worried: Dangerfield would look him up and down and see an 11-year-old as skinny as a rail. The Cauthens were told they'd better come back in a few days while he thought about it. For those three days Steve was sweating bullets, his stomach tighter than a drumhead.

And so the first race-ride came to pass. On Saturday, 12 May 1976, one week after Bold Forbes had won the Kentucky Derby in the hands of Angel Cordero, Steve Cauthen walked into the jock's room at Churchill Downs. If any of the jocks assumed this latest whippersnapper would be greener than a seasick frog they were in for the rudest of awakenings. He entered as if it were the family lounge back in Walton. Not with the hip-rolling strut of a dandified bantam like a Tod Sloan or Steve Donoghue. But the confident swagger of a 16-year-old youth going on 36-year-old man. After all, he'd been preparing for this moment for half his life. He'd served his 'apprenticeship' before he even began one. He'd become an overnight success who had been working at being an overnight success for years.

Tex Cauthen had had to work over-time to secure his son a debut ride. The animal was called King of Swat. His odds were 136/1. They were perfectly accurate. He was thought only fit enough to run four of the six furlongs at pace. Cauthen rode King of Swat through an even-time opening half-mile in third or fourth – before they fell away to beat just one of the 11 to the wire, 16 lengths behind the winner. But the teenager had given the horse a 'proper' ride. An hour later Cauthen rode a second no-hoper, Singing Saint, into sixth.

Cauthen was now a bona fide 'bug boy' – so named from the insect-like asterisk beside the name of an apprentice on the race chart. A triple bug denoted the rider got a 10lb allowance; after riding five winners, only a double bug equating to a 7lb allowance presented itself; 35 wins equalled a single bug and 5lb; and after a year the bug was removed altogether.

Getting rides, decent rides, was the greatest challenge for any bug boy; out of an annual crop of 150 apprentices, only 25 will eventually make a living – and maybe five of those will become truly successful. When trainers have invested months of endeavour in a horse with one opportunity in mind, perhaps the only opportunity to win that might come the way of an ordinary, moderate animal, the last thing he wants is for an inexperienced jockey to screw it up in a matter of seconds. Cauthen was in a fortunate position. Five days after his debut, his uncle, Tommy Bischoff, chose to exploit the 10lb weight reduction by giving him the leg-up on Red Pipe in a five-and-a-half furlong sprint at River Downs. Uncle instructed nephew to relax his mount on the sloppy track and bring him through with one run down the stretch. The jockey practised what the trainer preached. He must have been 15 lengths out of it at the three pole. But when they hit the stretch and Cauthen finally went to the whip, the horse really charged home. For the first time he felt the joy of a horse responding to win his race. It felt just as good as he'd always envisaged. Red Pipe passed under the wire one and a half lengths to the good. His young pilot was lathered in the jock's room with shaving cream and boot polish. His initiation was complete. Cauthen's life was about to change from black and white into colour. American racing had caught lightning in a bottle. It just didn't know it yet.

It got its first inkling one week later when Cauthen nursed Mary McCullough, a filly bred and owned by his mother, to his second win. Within days the triple bug beside his name disappeared. Then, at the River Downs summer meeting, the 16-year-old set trackside tongues wagging with a record 96 wins in 56 days of racing at a winning average of 24 per cent. It was the forerunner of many records 'The Kid' would smash in the next two years. The word soon got around. Something special was happening. Those racing gods that had entrusted Cauthen with a spark of genius now blew on it and made it glow. One trainer mused: 'You can give a violin to a thousand kids, give them all the same encouragement and lessons, but only one ends up playing beautiful music. And we're lucky to be around that one of a kind.'