

### The Grand National: They're off – but I'm lost for words

based on an article by Sarah Rainey



- 1 Aaand they're off! Aaand I've completely lost the power of speech. "Um," I stutter, squinting at the galloping mass hundreds of metres down below. "It's the second race of the day at Aintree and the horses are running ... really fast ... and they've gone over the first jump ..." I feel a sharp elbow in my ribcage. "Sorry – over the 'flight' ... and the red one's in the lead, with another reddish one – no, it's purple – just behind him..." I gabble incoherently, pointing out everything from the colour of the grass to the lovely hats worn by the female spectators. The man to my right buries his head in his hands.
- 2 Four floors above the Aintree racecourse, I'm standing in a tiny box, armed with binoculars and a microphone, being tutored by Simon Holt, Channel 4's master commentator. On Thursday, as crowds of 33,000 flocked to the opening day of the biggest race meeting of the year, he agreed to teach me the tricks of the commentary trade. He warns me he thinks I am not up to the job. I'm clearly living up to his low expectations of me.
- 3 "This job is not easy," insists Holt. "I still get nervous going into the big meetings, but you have to mask it and try to sound as calm as possible. The pressure of getting it right can be immense. It is an adrenalin rush but you have good days and bad days. That's the beauty of horse racing. It's very risky trying to pre-prepare lines because you have absolutely no idea what's going to happen."
- 4 As a commentator, the three days of the Grand National, the 175-year-old National Hunt race held in Liverpool every April, make up Holt's biggest audience of the year. But he appears utterly unflappable, before and during the race. Just minutes before Channel 4 goes on air, all he's got by way of notes is a tattered copy of *The Racing Post*, which he repeatedly flicks through before shutting his eyes and mumbling, trance-like, about reds and blues and greens. "Colours," he exclaims, "are the

absolute basics. You've got to know which horse is which just by looking, otherwise you won't be any good."

5 He hands me the card for my race, the Betfred Bowl Steeple Chase, which, thankfully, features only six horses. Still, I've got just half an hour to memorise their colours and names, which include mouthfuls such as "Houblon Des Obeaux" and "Silviniaco Conti". Distinctive features such as a white face or coloured blinkers can help tell them apart – and then it's all about clarity and diction. "You are communicating things to the audience so they must be able to understand," says Holt. "Also, there's the element of performance, where you raise your voice to supplement the excitement."

6 For big races, to ensure he doesn't mess up, Holt is accompanied by Nicky Leeson, his "spotter", who watches the horses on two screens in the commentary box, tallies the fences and whispers in Holt's ear if he's missed something. He needs this back-up because accuracy is essential as well.

7 Are there many female commentators? "Sadly not," he says. "The promoters did hold a competition recently to try to find some, but it was called the 'Filly Factor' and it was a bit naff. There are so many women who work in the business now, so I reckon it's only a matter of time. Though it does help to have a deeper, husky voice, it makes it easier to build up to a crescendo."

8 It's 2.30pm and my race is about to begin. Any last words of wisdom? "Keep up the rhythmic, continuous patter. And if you get it wrong, don't – whatever you do – stop. Remember that commentators are allowed to be 23: we're not robots in the box, so it's OK to make mistakes as long as you keep going."

9 Bang! It's started – and I mumble and mutter my way through six minutes of a race that I, quite frankly, don't understand. I can't tell which bit of the course they're on, how many jumps there are to go or even which one is in the lead. The horses are a blur, the jockeys blend into one and the roar of the crowd throws me off.

10 Holt has mentored many a young jockey, but says that, more than anything, he is pestered for tips. Holt says: "The trouble is that horses can't tell you if they're not feeling well or if they don't like the track or if they're going too fast. There are no guarantees." So which horse will he be backing this year? "Actually, I'm not much of a gambler," says Holt with a laugh, surveying the majestic scene below. "Why would I bother? I get to stay up here, enjoying the best seat in the house."

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