

‘Racing is not a racist sport but the betting world is far more diversified’

Former jockey Josh Apiafi is pulling in the punters with Rewards4Racing, writes Marcus Armytage.

Josh Apiafi has just commissioned an author to write his father Harry’s memoirs. It will be called *No One Told Me I Couldn’t* – a suitable maxim for the Apiafi family given the history of its last three generations, and for entrepreneurs in general.

His grandfather, also Josh, was born in Opobo, Nigeria, and, between the world wars, stowed away on a ship bound for Liverpool. At a time when mixed marriages were rare, he wed a white Irish Catholic, and Harry Apiafi was born at the height of the war.

His mother left home when Harry was four. He was orphaned at eight and illiterate until 12. But he joined the RAF, then flew planes commercially and ended up owning an airline. At no stage did anyone tell him he couldn’t.



Josh, now 42, started riding aged four and only wanted to go as fast as he could over the biggest fences possible. “It wasn’t a specific love of horses. It was just my extreme sport, my white-knuckle ride,” he recalled.

His father’s chance pairing with a co-pilot with a black eye in 1988 shaped Josh Apiafi’s life. His dad asked his co-pilot how he had come by it. “Riding in the Grand National,” replied Al Hambly, an amateur rider who had fallen at Aintree on Smartside at the 17th fence.

Apiafi asked Hambly if he would take his 10-year-old son racing one day. He obliged, at Ludlow, and from that moment Apiafi never wanted to do anything else.

He rode out for a few trainers but reckoned as a beginner he should apply to a fledgling trainer so that the pair could come up together. “I get your logic,” said his father. “But if you want to be the best, why don’t you go to the best?” And they composed a letter to Martin Pipe.

“We drove down there, Dad ran through every question he thought Martin would ask and he asked every question Dad had said he would, including: ‘Why an earth do you want to join us?’

“‘If you want to be the best you have to join the best,’ replied Apiafi triumphantly, to which Pipe turned to his father and said: “He knows all the f---ing answers, anyway.”

And so began his life in what was, and pretty much remains, a white man's world. He spent two years with Pipe, rode 10 winners from roughly 100 rides and, though not unique, black or mixed-race jockeys were as uncommon then as they are now.

"Of course, if you got a b-----ing in those days, someone might throw in 'black' just as they might 'Irish', but the world has changed now," explained Apiafi.

"Lads get one b-----ing now and they're off. But I had been in the England Under-16 basketball squad and was 6ft tall, so, in a yard of jockeys, I was never going to get too much bother.

"I loved every minute at Martin's, I've always worked at places that challenged the norm. But I'd had a nice upbringing and I knew riding out wasn't going to get me a mortgage and nice holidays."

He applied for every job in racing outside of a yard for a year but when he failed even to get an interview as a clerical assistant at Market Rasen, he knew he needed to come up with his own ideas. Aged 22, he set up his first business, going round racecourses with promotional literature.

One dot.com client, which was run on a shoestring, wanted him to advertise its product. It was Betfair, which subsequently recruited him as marketing manager when it boasted 25 employees. When he left, it employed 1,500.

One of his first coups was to sponsor Fulham for a Premiership season for £500,000. On the back of an excellent World Cup, the Japanese player Junichi Inamoto was more popular in Asia than David Beckham, and the vast majority of his photographs had Betfair emblazoned on his front.

Apiafi devised the Betfair Chase to give King George horses a meaningful warm-up. "I kept seeing Best Mate preparing for the King George by running over 2½ miles at Huntingdon," he said. "The irony was, we never got Best Mate to run in it."

He left Betfair when it got too big for him and had moved away from the entrepreneurial joy of the start-up and early growth. He ran the Professional Jockeys' Association for a while, but was perhaps even a touch too commercial in his dealings for the jockeys.

In 2007, Apiafi was approached with a plan for a racing loyalty card, Rewards4Racing. Nectar and Airmiles had been around for a while and this was being rolled out from golf. The plan was that when you bet with one of its betting partners, Bet365, Coral or Betfred, or with 4,000 online retailers, one per cent goes towards points which could then be offset against racecourse tickets.

"I looked at the model and thought something which was trying to get people to go racing – 'we get racegoers going' is our motto – was amazing.

"Back then, though, racing wasn't ready for it. Then, 80 per cent of tickets were walk-ups or phone bookings.

"By the time we launched in 2009, it had flipped – 80 per cent of bookings were online. People started trusting online and we approached the Jockey Club. The big statistic was that racing had a churn problem; a lot of people went – but only once." Rewards4Racing now has 1.2million members and last year 170,000 tickets were bought through the system – double the Cheltenham Gold Cup crowd and then some. This month, Arena Racing Company courses join the Jockey Club's 15 courses and York to double Reward4Racing's member tracks to 32. That makes tickets for 900 fixtures available through the initiative. Apiafi has also been recruited to the BHA's diversity group.

"I took Dad to Cheltenham in 2002 and he turned to me jokingly and said: 'Not a lot of brothers here!' I had never noticed until he pointed it out, but he didn't notice that there were few other black pilots until it was pointed out to him. Racing's not a racist sport but, like some other pastimes, it's not that open for different reasons.

“As a young kid, I got loads of it. I was the only non-white in a school of 1,500 kids and when I went to Martin Pipe’s, I think the only other nonwhite in Somerset was Viv Richards!”

But far from seeing it as a problem, like all entrepreneurs, Apiafi sees only the massive potential.

“The betting world is far more diversified,” he pointed out. “Go into any betting shop in London – there’s a huge untapped audience.”