

By ZOË SMITH

THE BIG INTERVIEW

# Clare Balding

“ I’m doing the most satisfying, brilliant, exciting varied job in the world! ”



At the pinnacle of her flat racing career, Clare secured the title of Champion Lady Rider

One of Britain's most beloved broadcasters, Clare Balding chats about championing women in sport, racing against Kelly Marks, and her horse-inspired children's books with *IH Magazine* Editor Zoë Smith...

With an award-winning 25-year career in broadcasting, a resumé that reads like a recap of Britain's modern sporting history, and a burgeoning career as a best-selling children's author; Clare Balding has clocked up more than enough accolades to qualify for 'National Treasure' status, although she's far too humble to admit it. Since making her TV debut for the BBC in 1995, she's become one of Britain's leading female sports presenters, covering events from Wimbledon to Crufts, to the Commonwealth Games and six Olympic Games. And if she wasn't already well on her way to being a household name before the 2012 London Olympics and Paralympics, there's no doubt that everyone knew who she was afterwards. "It was the greatest event I ever worked on without a shadow of a doubt," she enthuses. "I don't think I will ever beat that. That feeling that the entire nation was engrossed and invested in one thing; it was so positive and so uplifting."

Clare's almost encyclopaedic knowledge of sports spans all disciplines, but her roots lie in equestrian sports. "I'm fairly certain I was riding before I was walking, which I think is common for people who grow up around horses" Clare tells me, laughing, "I think it's probably easier for our parents to just stick us on a horse or a pony, rather than push us around in a pram!"

Clare comes from racing royalty, at least by approximation – her dad, Ian Balding, trained racehorses for The Queen, as well as the legendary Derby-winner Mill Reef, and Clare was gifted her first pony, a Shetland named Valkyrie, from Her Majesty. "[Valkyrie] was very sweet and

very keen on good manners and she had a very good sense of how one should behave. She did not like a child throwing a tantrum... which I might have been prone to do!" Clare admits. "I remember very early on my dad insisting that we had to fall off a hundred times before we could be considered proper jockeys and my brother and I taking that literally and falling off every day on purpose, ten times a day, and really going for it! And actually, I think it's quite a good lesson really, because you learn not to be frightened of falling and if you're not frightened of falling, you don't resist it and you're much more relaxed in your body, and you're just much less likely to fall off if you're not frightened of it."

She describes a childhood where she was always "desperate to be riding and learning something new", but despite harbouring big dreams of becoming an event rider, the family business soon tempted her and she enjoyed a successful run as an amateur flat jockey in her late teens. Fun fact: another successful female jockey of the time was our very own Kelly Marks and the two raced against each other on a number of occasions. Kelly humbly admits to me that Clare almost always beat her (although she definitely said 'almost!') and when I tell Clare this, she's equally modest: "Oh, I don't know if that was true! She was a very good rider and her dad was a racehorse trainer, as was mine". She pauses for a second, perhaps pondering whether, being young women in a largely male-dominated industry, they shared

similarities that went beyond the adrenaline rush of the race days. "I think a lot of girls find that they struggle a bit for their father's attention and I think I started riding the racehorses because that was obviously something my father was interested in," she admits. "For some reason, he didn't rate finishing 7th in a one day event as being anything that was to be celebrated! 'Why didn't you win?' would be the familiar refrain. And I see that happening now with my nephews. My middle nephew is really into eventing and I see the lack of understanding from his father, because he's very similar to my Dad (Clare's brother, Andrew Balding is now a leading racehorse trainer like their father). They live in a binary world, where you win a race or you don't, and finishing 5th or 3rd or 7th isn't something that they understand. They just don't get

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Clare with her father, racehorse trainer Ian Balding

Photo © David Hartley

why that would be any good! And you might come back absolutely delighted because you've got your best ever mark in a dressage test, but it's still not good enough."

Never one to feel sorry for herself, this only fuelled Clare's determination and when, shortly after her 16th birthday, her Dad asked her if she wanted to ride in a point-to-point, she was ready and willing to put her eventing career on pause. "I enjoyed it," Clare tells me, "but I think if I'm really honest, I enjoyed it more because I was doing something that made him proud."

That tenacity and dedication came into play later on and the pinnacle of her flat racing career was securing the title of Champion Lady Rider in 1990. "I was locked into this very intense battle for the championship. I lost it the first year

and I won it the second year, and my dad was really involved in that," Clare recounts. "I'd be running every morning in a sweatsuit; I had to get down to 10 stone 2 pounds. It wasn't easy for me. I put a lot of effort into it, but I knew I couldn't sustain it. If I'd been two stone lighter, and never had to think about what I was eating, it might have been more straightforward."

"But actually," she confesses, "I enjoyed the fact that I had to work so hard just to be able to do it. I got a perverse sense of satisfaction out of that. That I *really, really* had to graft. It wasn't just the running and the losing weight, but I was riding three or four horses every morning and working like everyone else at the yard, tacking up and mucking out."

While she might not have made it as a professional rider, Clare looks back on her time as a competitor fondly, telling me: "I was really lucky. I won some amazing things. You're not allowed to win money [as an amateur jockey], but I won a car and my weight in champagne – it was incredible!" It was her background in racing that secured her first job as a broadcaster, presenting the highlights from Royal Ascot. She went on to be one of the leading presenters of Channel 4 Racing for many years and has no regrets over the way things turned out. "People often ask me if I miss [competing], but how could I miss it? I'm doing the most satisfying, brilliant, exciting varied job in the world!" >>

# Clare Balding THE BIG INTERVIEW

>> As we talk today, she's on her way to Burghley Horse Trials, where she'll be covering the event live for the BBC and it's clearly the place she feels most at home. "I think it's the greatest example of good horsemanship because you have to have a real understanding with your horse. I just love it! I like the horses, I like the people, I like the event; it's really fun!"

Clare credits her experience with horses as having taught her skills and life lessons that have carried over into her broadcasting career.

"I think horses reflect both the best and the worst in us," she tells me. "I think that if you are patient and consistent, disciplined and kind... and sometimes adventurous; I think a horse will really reward that. And I think if you are impatient, or inconsistent, or unkind, your horse will react accordingly. It's the ultimate teamwork; you have to think as one and you learn the art of compromise. You are *asking* the horse to do something, you are not *telling* it."

She considers this for a moment, then adds: "that is quite a useful thing in the workplace. There are many times that I have to convince people of something and if that means I have to pretend it is their idea to make them want to do it, then that's fine! I don't need to get the glory. I think all of those things are good lessons [that we can take from horses]. And also that sense of adventure and taking the odd risk... the joy of galloping free or jumping a hedge that you never thought you could jump, but you've been eyeing it up for a year and waiting for it to be trimmed, and thinking 'right go on, I'll give it a go now!'"

Now 48, Clare's passion for horses shows little sign of waning. She's still a horse owner – "I have a racehorse that I bred called Pedal Power, who is in training with my brother, and a foal just born this year" – she rides when she can – "My nephew has just bought an eventer, so he might let me sit on him, but we'll see!" – and has even been quoted as saying she'd like the 'Black Beauty theme tune' played at her funeral! Her more recent foray into writing is notably horse-themed, too. After releasing her autobiography 'My Animals and Other Family' in 2012, she's since turned her writing prowess to children's fiction, penning a series of three books chronicling the adventures of heroine Charlie Bass and her racehorse, Noble Warrior – "The Racehorse Who Wouldn't Gallop", "The Racehorse Who Disappeared", and "The Racehorse Who Learned To Dance".

"There aren't that many books out there with female leads, with a heroine at the heart of it," Clare explains. "The Hunger Games would be one of the exceptions, but it's normally boys who are making decisions and winning battles. I also wanted to write about a girl who has to convince her brothers to do things – I'm really interested in that dynamic because I have a niece with two older brothers and I'm fascinated by how she persuades them to do the things she wants to do. Also, I don't think there are many horsey books out there [for kids]." Clare tells me, although she quickly adds, "Pippa Funnell writes really good ones". She jokes that Pippa scolded her for stepping on her toes, although there's clearly no rivalry between Clare's full-length novels and Pippa's short stories. Plus, Clare says: "She's written about 27 or something. I've only written three!"

Does she feel the pressure writing for a younger audience? "It's fun having a young audience and reaching out and talking to them, and them identifying with characters that you created. I had a girl

say to me a couple of weeks ago, 'I feel like you wrote it about me'. And I gave her a hug and I said, 'that is the greatest compliment you could pay me'. Because that's what you want; you want your readers to feel that you're writing about them."

Best-selling author might be among the more recent additions to her CV, but in a way, as Clare tells me, her whole career has had a storytelling element. "Sports have a great narrative to them and I like telling that story," she enthuses, adding: "I will at some point

write some kind of a book for kids about what sport teaches us.

"Sport [is full of] stories about human nature. These are stories about people who have tried and tried and *tried* at something, and they will have failed many times. You look at Ben Stokes' amazing innings [during the 2019 Ashes] to basically keep the Ashes alive – that isn't just a display of cricketing talent, that's a display of concentration and belief, and a refusal to accept that it's over. It is incredible really. And I love that about sports. I love that [British swimmer] Adam Peaty was a boy who was scared of water and is now the first man to swim 100 metres breaststroke in under 57 secs. He's a world-record beater, an Olympic champion, and he keeps trying to set the bar a little bit higher. And the same with Roger Federer, or Rafael Nadal, or Serena Williams.

"They are remarkable people, but," she says pointedly, "they aren't superheroes. They are just like us... I mean, you sometimes come across someone who you think 'no, you are actually wonder woman!' But for kids, I think it's so important to see that the hard work, the daily grind, the boring stuff... [that's what's important]. And I think kids enjoy that; they actually want to work hard. Especially, if they can see the light at the end of the tunnel, the progress, or the glory there might be [at the end], or even just take pleasure from improving bit by bit."

Overcoming obstacles is something Clare has had plenty of experience of in both her personal and professional life. She's talked in the past about her difficulties coming out and in particular, the troubles her grandmother had accepting it (Clare is now happily married to her long-term partner Alice Arnold), while back in 2009, Clare

was diagnosed and underwent treatment for thyroid cancer. Like most people in the public eye, she's also weathered her fair share of professional scandals and criticisms.

"There are moments when you feel like you are in the centre of the storm," she admits. "I got a lot of criticism the first year that we changed the highlights at Wimbledon (in 2015). Every day was bruising, but I regarded that a bit like when I'm playing a really bad round of golf! I think: 'Right, I am now working on my character!'"

Clare's resilience and unwavering positive attitude is undoubtedly one of the reasons that she is held in such high esteem both by her peers and the public. Above all, it's her professionalism and lack of ego – 'ultimately, it's not about me!' she insists – that lets her tune out all the noise and focus on the task in hand. "Those moments where you really think 'god, we're in trouble here!' and your ship is not on the course it should be and there are rocks all around, you really do have to just focus on the job. It's not about the awards or the glory, or any of that; it's just about the job. Trying to do the job and do it better every day. And..."

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Photo courtesy of Clare Balding / YMU Group



Photo courtesy of Clare Balding

Top: Clare with Archie, her beloved Tibetan terrier. Bottom: Clare and her brother with her parents and their Shetland pony, who was gifted to them by the queen on Clare's birth.

not being a bastard to work with!" she laughs but quickly drills her point home. "I feel that really strongly. You can't behave badly or start blaming people, even if people are having a go at you."

Over her career, Clare has developed a few strategies to deal with the public scrutiny. "I had a long conversation about social media the other day with Charlotte Dujardin after she got eliminated at Rotterdam," she tells me. (Charlotte's elimination for a blood stain on her horse's flank saw her face a huge backlash from critics on social media) "What I've learnt is that if I'm doing something big enough that it's got over a million viewers, you've suddenly got a profile out there that is bigger than you can control and you can sometimes feel like you are in the centre of a witch-hunt. But it's your choice whether to engage in that or not. And my rule is that whenever I'm doing those big events, I will not look at Twitter or social media. I might put pictures up or post stuff, but I am not going to allow myself to get mentally affected by people who don't like what I'm wearing, or don't like my hair, or think that I've offended them somehow when I haven't, or I certainly didn't intend to."

"Weeks later, you can go back and look at it, and it will make you laugh, but in the middle of it, it can really throw you off-track. And I've seen presenters looking at Twitter in the middle of programs and changing the way that they do things, because of something they've read from someone who is not a professional, who is not invested in them in the way that someone you trust or someone you work with is."

"It's not that you don't take feedback," she clarifies, "of course, you do. But if your editor and producer are asking for a certain style or they want something to be covered, or they are telling you to speed up or you need to cut an interview short because you're going to something else, that's what you've got to do."

"Another thing to remember is... Social media is brilliant; it's a great way of connecting with people, but if you are looking to social media for affirmation that you are loved, then you are looking in the wrong place, I think. And equally, if you are taking too seriously the media's opinions when they are telling you they don't like you."

## “...she's made a point of standing up for causes that she believes in...”

Clare with Nutmeg and some members of the Carlisle RDA



I was in the papers from a very young age, either as a race rider or as a broadcaster, and I was always clear in my head that when you are being praised by everyone, that's not real, and when you're being downed by everyone, that's not real either. You need to keep some sense of reality and not care about [people's opinions] that much. You need to love your job and that's what keeps you going every day."

Charlotte Dujardin isn't the only one lucky enough to benefit from Clare's words of wisdom; over her career, she's made a point of standing up for causes that she believes in, whether it's LGBT rights, better coverage of women's and Paralympic sports, or equal pay.

"It's difficult to do when you are in your 20s and 30s, but then I think when you get to your 40s, when you've got a bit of foundation to your building as it were, that is when I think it's important to start saying things on behalf of other people, not just yourself. I'm freelance, so I'm always at the beck and call of whether people want me or not, and there's a lot of fear that can be created by those comments of 'well, you don't want to be too difficult' but I just think, 'no, I'm not being difficult, I'm just pointing out that equal pay is the law, and please don't fire this back at me as something I am 'being difficult' about. You do have to keep saying it because people will get away with a lot [if you let them]."

As resolved as she is to point out the industry's wrongs, she is equally quick to commend its advancements. She has championed the growth of women's sports over recent years, spoken about her excitement at the growing prestige of the Paralympics, and is effusive in her praise of her female peers at the BBC: "Laura Kuenssberg and Katya Adler are both phenomenal". Even her future ambitions focus on female empowerment: "I'd love to get a drama commissioned around women's football and I've been trying to do that for a while."

When I ask her what advice she would give to her younger self, she tells me without hesitation: "Don't be so frightened of what other people think. Care about what you think and be the person you want to be." And perhaps the most relatable thing about Clare is that the person she is – hard-working, passionate, self-effacing, and undeniably likeable – is exactly the kind of person we would all like to be. ■

## SUPPORTING & PROMOTING THE RIDING FOR THE DISABLED ASSOCIATION

Clare's series of three books chronicle the adventures of heroine Charlie Bass and her racehorse, Noble Warrior. The launch of Clare's new children's book 'The Racehorse who Learned to Dance' which features a character who goes to RDA, has further boosted support for the charity.

In 2013 Clare helped to find Nutmeg, a Thoroughbred mare, for the Carlisle branch of the RDA. Nutmeg is an ex-racehorse that Clare found through her racing industry connections. Nutmeg is transforming the lives of the children who ride at the Carlisle RDA.

