

It was a gorgeous day down in the stallion yard. Birdsong, sunlight urging the most wizened of faces into a squinty grin, a few scudding clouds. A four-year-old colt – called, with good reason, Untouchable – snorted and jig-jogged as he was walked up and down. Half-a-ton of testosterone with teeth, and a magnificent swishing tail, and four pointed hooves. Photographs were required for his new calling card – a side-on portrait to show off his immense musculature, that neck cresting like a perfect wave; and a few ‘incidentals’ to reveal some character, his lustrous eye, perhaps, that deep jaw and broad chest, the poised power of a rare stationary moment. The photographer clicked, and ducked, and moved, and clicked again. He cooed at the horse, he cooed at the groom, at once instructing and becalming. Click, duck, ‘Yes!’, move, ‘Back a little – yes!’, click. Then he stood up, handed over his camera, wriggled out of his capacious leather jacket – an ageing thing, black of course, but too lengthy to be fashionable, and with the soft shoulders of something made well over a decade before – and, sweeping away at his own foppish forelock, he lay on the grass right in front of the horse, rolled on his back and shimmied ever closer to those steel-strong hooves, each as big as a bucket. Untouchable stood stock still. Were he to paw at the earth in front of him, as he was so often prone to do, we’d have been needing a new photographer. Click, shimmy, shimmy, click. The never-before seen view of the underside of a racehorse’s head.

That was John Reardon all over, seeing familiar things entirely afresh, finding danger in the most bucolic and benign of scenes and, wizened and grinning, going over and beyond (or indeed under and below) to take a better photo. Or, rather, ‘make’ a better photo. The distinction, which he insisted upon, was not so much pretentious as ambitious: his images were always intended, never stolen.

These photographs of thoroughbred stallions raced by Sheikh Mohammed of Dubai’s Godolphin stable, began as a half-derided summer job – ‘Just commercial work!’ he would wince, appalled by the revolting vulgarity of privilege and prosperity. It lasted 16 years, almost until his death at 66 five years ago. Back when it all began – on the eve of his 50th birthday and after photographing 14 wars and untold natural disasters for news pages

and Sunday supplements, the kind of stark, stylish foreign forays that newspaper budgets would less and less stretch to – he might have feared that he was retiring to grass. In fact, it was to be one last wild ride.

For weeks at a stretch, it took him to Ireland and France, Kentucky and Japan, Australia and, of course, Newmarket. That newly shod hoof? It belongs to Cape Cross, who went on to father one of the all-time greats of the game, Sea The Stars. That arcing neck? King's Best, sire, too, of a Derby winner. The dappled grey in front of a dappled wall is Sagamix, hero of Europe's greatest race, the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe. Mark Of Esteem, winner of the 2,000 Guineas under jockey Frankie Dettori back in 1996 (Dettori won the race for a fourth and final time in May this year), paces in the shadows of a beech avenue, prettily silhouetted.

Reardon's work coincided with a new ambitiousness at Sheikh Mohammed's stud group, named Darley after one of the three Arab stallions from which all racehorses descend. Soon, his black and white images had been wallpapered over the entire racing world – adverts in the racing press and in race day racecards, hardback brochures with all the self-belief of gallery catalogues for the grandest retrospectives, billboards in racing towns and even adorning the vast sides of the occasional grandstand. 'Now see them in colour' was the strap line, as the Sheikh's people threw open the wrought ironmongery that guarded his imperious stud farms and invited in racing professionals and horsey enthusiasts alike.

It worked a treat. As the century ticked by, 26 stallions boomed to more than 60. Every year, Reardon re-invented his challenge. He photographed them with a special 65mm panoramic Hasselblad, turning the line of neck, withers, back and quarters into lush landscapes. He created a portable studio of all-white walls and had the stallions stare into his lens as if they were movie stars. One year, he went to photograph every major race, wherever it was run, anywhere in the world: he'd unfailingly find the story and tell it in a few startling frames – ever eclectic, ever hectic. He was out at dawn. He was there at

dusk. He climbed trees to get a better view and once inadvertently buzzed the Sheikh in his private swimming pool while hanging out of a helicopter.

Thousands of rolls of film. And when you look at one or two of them – spread out on a lightbox, through a Lupe, yellow Chinagraph poised: the way he insisted we all did for as long as he could hold the digital world at bay – you see what an extraordinary gift he had. 36 exposures, at least 20-25 different scenes or set-ups. Yes, he'd work a shot; but mostly he got what he wanted first time and that was that, he'd moved on, gone, tirelessly creative, his imagination fizzing like a lit fuse.

Racehorses, and the people in their realm, turned out to be his ideal subjects. Reardon's eye found the elegance, power, and plaintive vulnerability of whatever settled before his camera, and the thoroughbred is abound with elegance, power and vulnerability. He stared down from his rakish 6ft 3in with the most humane, even sentimental, of gazes. You see it across his work, across the years: people – and horses – rarely look better than in their John Reardon portrait. Click, duck, move, click. It might have started out as a job, but eventually it became his oeuvre.

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