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Death of a Legend – Great Sadness, but Magnificent Memories of Sir Henry Cecil

“Sir Henry was primus inter pares compared to other great trainers. Most definitely, first amongst equals. Not just because of what he achieved in training terms but through his charm, approachability and self-effacing dignity. A much loved person.”

Everyone connected to racing was hugely saddened following the death on 11th June 2013 of Sir Henry Cecil. It would be hard to think of anyone in our sport who has been so loved by the whole racing community. A huge loss, but also as the incredibly moving obituaries have emerged – particularly the one by Alastair Down in the *Racing Post* – there has been such a sense of reflection on and celebration of a magnificent training career. This is bound to pervade the whole of Royal Ascot. Apparently there is going to be a minute's silence when the meeting opens on Tuesday, and the Queen's Vase on Friday will be formally run in his memory.

It is actually difficult to grasp the enormity of his success since 1969, when he started training: 3,431 worldwide wins, 418 pattern races, 25 British Classic wins, 75 winners at Royal Ascot and 10 trainer titles. I'm sure we all have our own favourite horses from a career that spanned five decades. Few trainers have ever been so naturally gifted in the conditioning and training of the thoroughbred, particularly stayers. It seems a long time ago now, but I can still visualise the bold determination of that contrary character Le Moss winning the stayers' triple crown of Ascot, Goodwood and Doncaster Gold Cups at the end of the 1970s. And amazingly Sir Henry did the same again with Ardross at the start of the following decade. He won the fillies' Triple Crown with Oh So Sharp in 1985, and then exceeded that performance with the mighty Reference Point who completely dominated the Derby, King George and St. Leger with his captivating front-running style in 1987. I thought he wouldn't be surpassed. But then, in the twilight of Sir Henry's career, along came Frankel.

After the glory days, it was so sad to see the training and personal decline of Sir Henry to the nadir of 2005 when he was barely in the top 100 trainer list, and had been reduced to a miserly 12 winners. Worse was to come, with the physical decline as stomach cancer took its grip. And yet, in the same way that his beloved roses would often have a late-flowering bloom, so Frankel provided the perfect ending to a magnificent Indian summer that began with Light Shift in 2007 and ran through to Champions' Day at Ascot in the Autumn of 2012. I always felt that Frankel's most brilliant performance was in the Queen Anne at Royal Ascot that year, when he thrashed Excelebration by 11 lengths and earned the highest ever *Racing Post* rating of 143. My wife has a different view and thinks the 7-length victory in the Juddmonte International at York was more impressive for being over a longer trip. We were both on the Knavesmire that day, where the sense of the crowd's overpowering goodwill towards the agonisingly frail trainer was almost tangible. We also both went to Champions' Day to watch that victory, and followed Frankel in his final departure from the paddock, heading for his new career at stud. It was such a poignant moment, partly to see the last of a racehorse who had been undefeated over three seasons, but also because we believed he had helped keep his trainer alive, and that without him it would be hard to survive for very long. And so it has proved.

The five best Flat trainers I've seen are Vincent O'Brien, André Fabre, Sir Michael Stoute, Aidan O'Brien and Sir Henry Cecil. There are common characteristics: instinctive empathy for the racehorse, extreme patience and the ability to fine-tune and channel a horse's natural talent so that it can deliver the highest quality of performance on the track. But to my eyes Sir Henry would be *primus inter pares* when compared to those other great trainers. Most definitely first amongst equals, not only because of what he achieved in training terms but through his charm, approachability and self-effacing dignity. A much-loved person who will be massively missed, not just by his friends and family but by the whole racing community.

