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TOP: Matt Fitzpatrick

Leading birthday for Matt

■ Phil CASEY

MATT Fitzpatrick celebrated his 29th birthday by claiming the halfway lead in the Omega European Masters, with brother Alex hot on his heels.

Fitzpatrick added a second round of 65 to his opening 63 at Crans-sur-Sierre to reach 12 under par, a shot ahead of Sweden's Alexander Bjork.

Younger brother Alex returned a second consecutive 65 to share third place with France's Romain Langasque on 10 under, with Ryder Cup contenders Adrian Meronk and Ludvig Aberg another stroke back.

End

Pádraig Harrington added a 68 to his opening 67 to end up on 5 under-par.

Corkman John Murphy was two shots inside the 2 under par cut-of point, after a 68.

"The first nine I played fantastic, just carried on where I left off yesterday," said Fitzpatrick, who will replace Tommy Fleetwood in the final automatic qualifying place on the World Points list with a top-six finish.

"I'm disappointed obviously, to only shoot level par on the front given the scoring opportunities, but I'm in a good position."

Asked about the prospect of battling his brother for the title over the weekend, the former US Open champion said: "It's weird competing for a tournament because we never did it in juniors."

"I was asking Nicolai (Hojgaard) if he and Rasmus did it and he said they did in juniors, but they're the same age and we're four years apart."

"It's going to be a nightmare for my parents."



Brian FLANAGAN
EXCLUSIVE

HIS damaged voice is a constant reminder — but Wesley Joyce can't remember anything about the horrific fall at Galway last summer that almost cost him his life.

The 20-year-old apprentice jockey's miraculous return to the winners' enclosure this week has been the sort of inspirational sporting story only Hollywood could script.

From catastrophic and life-threatening injuries to powering home winners at Cork on Wednesday and Navan on Thursday, Joyce has been to hell and back in the space of a year.

It has been a story of incredible courage and strength, against all the odds, that has put a smile on the racing community in Ireland and abroad.

"The first two weeks in hospital I can't remember anything. But I always wanted to come back. There was nothing else in the world I wanted to do.

"Since the fall, the journey has been so hard, but I'll never get this buzz anywhere else," says Joyce, taking time out from the morning shift at boss Johnny Murtagh's yard on the Curragh.

For a few days last summer it really was touch and go for Joyce.

Crushed

He lay in intensive care, heavily sedated and on a ventilator, his upper body crushed from the force of the several horses who had galloped all over his tiny seven stone frame.

The damage was horrendous. He was, in a second, left fighting for his life.

Joyce and his mount Red Heel were in front and leading the valuable Listed Corrib Stakes on the fourth day of the 2022 Galway Festival.

It was the biggest race the then 19-year-old had ever ridden in.

But just two furlongs into the contest the mare jinked at a road crossing and stumbled — catapulting Joyce out of the saddle and into the path of the other 13 runners who inadvertently ran right over him.

As the heaving 30,000 Ladies Day attendance partied in the sunshine, Joyce was being rushed to Galway University Hospital with Dr Jennifer Pugh and racecourse medical staff working frantically to save him.

For 48 hours the racing world waited nervously for news.

The IHRB social media updates were the only source of information.

Thankfully, his condition improved and Joyce pulled through, but his injuries included major trauma to his chest, a punctured lung, broken ribs, a broken shoulder and a fractured larynx.

He would go to spend a further three months in hospital. His life had been saved but his career as a jockey looked finished. Not long before it had started.

But the Limerick city native is the definition of determination.

His story was already an inspiration even before his comeback of comebacks at

The journey has been very hard but I'll never get this buzz anywhere else

JOYCE'S RETURN AND WIN IN CORK THE ULTIMATE FEEL-GOOD STORY

Mallow on Thursday.

He's a kid who had come from Moyross and made something of himself.

A lad who kicked off his riding career at the age of just five when he attended a Racing Academy and Centre of Education outreach programme in conjunction with the Moyross Youth Academy.

"I come from what you'd call a rough enough area (Moyross). I'm proud of that. "I'd like to think it shows there are good people from there and one small group can give a place a bad name," says Joyce.

He now counts fellow Moyross man Keith Earls as a friend and mentor:

"I talk to Keith, we text back and forth. I've been to his coffee shop in Annacotty.

"He's a nice man and good to hook up with," adds Joyce,

"It's great to be back. All I wanted was to ride horses again. I love the game. I enjoy getting up in the morning and coming to work.

"Especially coming here to Johnny Murtagh.

Long

"It's been a long road. I was a year out and trying to get back fit and doing stuff to keep myself busy.

"I came back to Johnny's and it's been kicking on

from there."

Joyce had his first ride back early last month at Naas and after a number of near misses he finally rode the first winner of his return on Trueba

for trainer Eddie Lenihan at Cork on Thursday — with his parents in attendance.

He followed up the very next

day at Navan with another winner — this time on Enquire Within for trainer Frankie Hand.

"It was very special to have my parents at Cork. That's the first time they've seen me ride a winner.

"It was nice to do it on Trueba too. He's been a good servant to me.

Fall

"Dr Jennifer Pugh is a great woman. She was there when I got my fall.

"She organised everything in an instant. Got me straight to the hospital.

"They took good care of me in Galway, they really saved my life. I'm so grateful for that and thankful to everyone that worked on me in Galway hospital."



TOP DOC: IHRB Chief Medical Officer Dr Jennifer Pugh was at Cork racecourse to congratulate Joyce on his first winner back after injury

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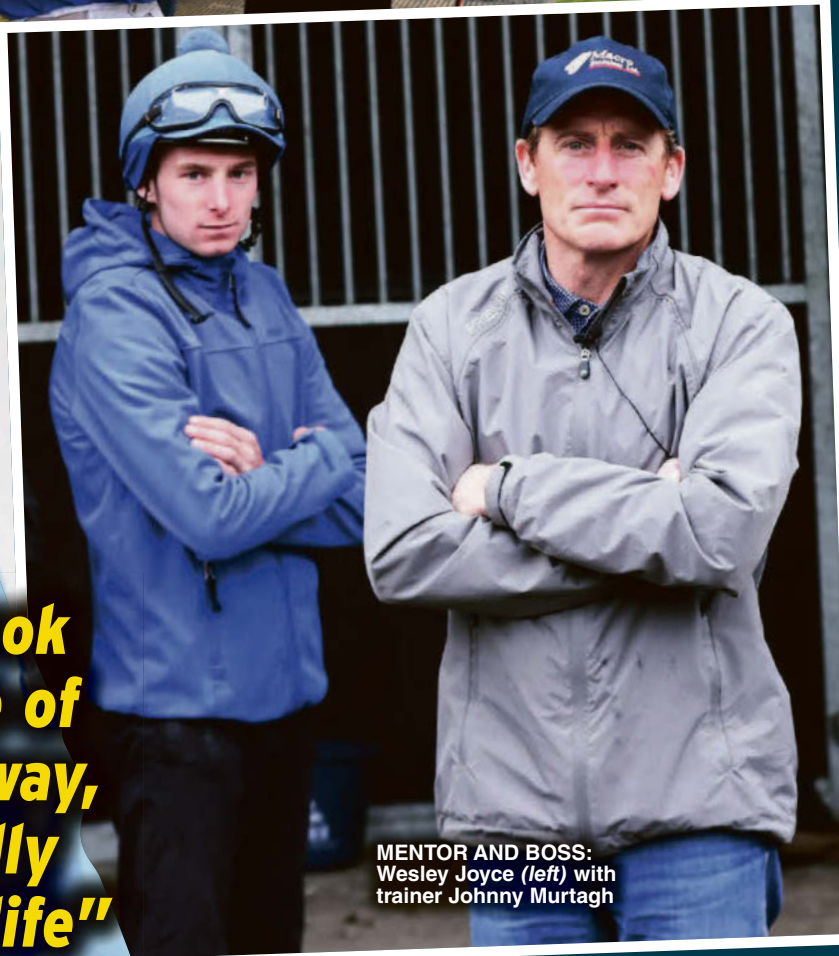


SMILING THROUGH: Wesley Joyce at Johnny Murtagh's yard on The Curragh in Kildare

"They took good care of me in Galway, they really saved my life"



THUMBS UP: Jockey Wesley Joyce after riding Trueba to his first win since his comeback from his horrific injury ordeal



MENTOR AND BOSS: Wesley Joyce (left) with trainer Johnny Murtagh

Dr Pugh has also spoken of her admiration for Joyce's return, explaining how he has "shown an astonishing level of commitment to his recovery and in his quest to return to fitness and race riding."

"To say he has climbed a mountain is an understatement and he is a credit to himself and our sport," she added.

Joyce's fitness is very good now. He was left with just 80 per cent lung capacity and that fractured larynx means he speaks in very hushed tones.

"I'm 100 per cent fit. I have 80 per cent lung capacity but it's not affecting me and I feel perfect. I have to go for surgery in November when the season is over for my voice box but I hope to get back as soon as I can after that."

Murtagh has been a mentor as well as a boss to Joyce. A hugely successful jockey, he's been training on the Curragh for the past ten years.

He doesn't think that lack of a shout will prevent him from having an edge on the track.

"He's a good whistler," says Murtagh. "In Ireland if you shout for room, sometimes it's the worst thing you can do."

Whistle

"Fellas will cut across ya. Being quiet is not too bad. He can whistle."

"If you're down the inside and you've got that real piercing whistle, you'll be fine."

"I don't think it (voice) will affect him. I said to him when you're speaking to people just kind of look them in the eye and get close to them. So that they can hear you."

Murtagh went on to joke:

"He's a bit of a character. The lads in the yard are absolutely delighted because you couldn't shut him up when he came first and now he doesn't say anything to anyone!"

"If you saw him the first day he came back in here, he was about five stone. I didn't really think he'd get back. I said 'no way'. He was very weak."

"But after a couple of weeks as soon as he got back riding out I realised he hadn't lost his nerve, that was the main thing for me. He just doesn't see any danger. You probably need that to be a good jockey."

"He built himself up in the gym and on the mechanical horses and worked with a dietician."

"The first few bits of work he rode it was hard for him to catch his breath. But he

worked so hard.

"He rode well for me the last two weeks, he's been flying. He's a great lad. He has a chance of being really, really good."

"When I saw him lying in the bed in Galway, I just said 'Thank God he's alive' and look where he's come now. He's only going to get better too."

Better

Getting better is Joyce's ambition too as he hopes to add lots more big winners to his career haul that now sits on 22.

"Things are going very well. I am very grateful for the opportunities from outside trainers and the support Johnny has been giving me and my agent Denis Lenihan." "Johnny has been so important to me in my career.

"Michael Mulvaney has been very good to me also. He's got me going again and given me plenty of rides. I'd really like to thank him and his family."

"My ambition is to keep improving and get as many winners as I can this year."

Joyce had many visitors to his Galway ward over the three month period in hospital. One sticks in his mind.

"When I was in hospital and lying in the bed, Davy Russell came and walked through the doors. He bought me some sweets and a drink."

"He sat down next to me and we chatted but didn't he go and eat all of my sweets!"

The last line goes to the always chirpy Murtagh: "There's great stories in racing and this is one of the great stories".

Few can argue with that.



HURDLE: Eubank Jr

Eubank bent on revenge

Chris McKenna

CHRIS EUBANK JR could be on Love Island rather than walking into a cauldron of hate if he didn't have the motivation to still make his mark in the sport.

The Brighton middleweight is out for revenge against Liam Smith when they face each other in a rematch tonight at Manchester Arena.

Former world light-middleweight champion Smith caused an upset when he stopped Eubank Jr back in January at the same venue.

Wounds

It left the son of two-weight world champion Chris Sr licking his wounds, but he refused to walk away from the sport.

He believes it is just another hurdle he's had to overcome in his life.

"The mental fortitude it has taken for me to get here ... everything was stacked against me," he said.

"Most people said when I started my career, 'He will win a couple of fights, then he will get banged out after he's made a couple of quid and he will get on Love Island'."

"It wasn't supposed to happen, that I would have 35 fights, 32 wins, box office. I was never supposed to be here."

Eubank Jr's loss to Smith was the third of his career, it left his world title ambitions looking slim.

He annoyed when Victor Loughlin stopped the first fight in the fourth round, despite him being up on his feet.

And he hopes tonight's man in the middle — novice referee Kevin Parker — gives him a chance to fight on.

He added: "At this level, give these fighters as much of an opportunity as they want to do what they have to do to win."