

2006 DOESN'T seem that long ago. That's because it isn't for most of us.

It was a record breaking year for Irish-trained horses at the Cheltenham Festival.

Ten winners was the most we had ever shouted home in the Cotswolds.

It was also a green sweep in the Championship races. Brave Inca won the Champion Hurdle, Newmill the Champion Chase and War Of Attrition the Gold Cup.

It was Celtic Tiger boom times.

There was even a 'Party in the Park' at Farnleigh for connections of the big three. But one 49-year-old Irishman walked out of Prestbury Park on St Patrick's Day in 2006 with a furrowed brow, fiercely dejected at the events of the past four days.

His name was William Peter Mullins.

It seems absurd now to think that as recently as 2006, Mullins left Cheltenham empty-handed.

No winners from 16 runners.

Of course, he wasn't as dominant, or his Closutton operation nowhere near as vast as it is now, but he was still one of Ireland's top trainers at that time having been champion for the first time in 2001.

He'd won the Grand National at Aintree in 2005 and things were ticking along nicely but 2006 was an annus horribilis for Mullins. He ran four in the bumper, but hot favourite Equus Maximus was best in 12th.

Other fancied runners like Missed That, Mister Hight and Quatre Heures ran stinkers.

Hedgehunter did run a cracker in the Gold Cup to finish second but the loss of both Holy Orders and Mr Babbage to fatal injuries left a dark cloud over the yard.

Mullins' all-time tally of nine Festival winners wasn't improved on.

Indeed, it took a win for 40-1 'no-hoper' Ebaziyan to reach double figures in 2007, but just 17 years later Mullins now stands on the brink of 100 Cheltenham Festival winners.

Since then, he's had 84 winners or, even more mind-blowing, 65 in the past decade.

He needs half a dozen to hit the century and considering he trains the favourite for half of the 28 races here this week, that looks an odds on shot.

So what changed? How did Mullins become the unstoppable force in National Hunt racing?

There's no single reason. It was the culmination of many things.

First things first. Mullins is a brilliant trainer, learning his skills from men like his father Paddy and Jim Bolger.

The Ruby Walsh factor was also hugely important. Walsh was the best rider of his generation and his tactical genius and knowledge of the sport - as seen in his media work today - gave Mullins a serious advantage over others.

But the real edge came in where Mullins began to source his horses.

Around the time of that 2006 blank, Mullins started to work in partnership with a Frenchman named Pierre Boulard.

His links with the Mullins family stretched back to when Willie's dad Paddy won the French Champion Hurdle in 1984 with Dawn Run.

Boulard (inset) was a young assistant at their Maisons-Laffitte base and doubled as his translator before spending a year in the Mullins family home at Doninga broadening his vocabulary. The Lyon-born Boulard began horse

THE MAKING OF MULLINS



Willie Mullins is on the cusp of an incredible 100 Festival winners. **BRIAN FLANAGAN** charts how a winless week in 2006 was the catalyst for him to take his operation to a different league



DREAM TEAM: Harold Kirk with Ricci Ricci; (right) Willie Mullins and Paul Townend after Galopin Des Champs won the Gold Cup last March



BIG MOMENTS: Ruby Walsh and Willie Mullins in the original Ricci colours worn on Scotsirish; (above) Quevega wins at Festival

trading after spells with a licence in Saudi Arabia and Germany.

Along with bloodstock agent Harold Kirk, Mullins' French connection began to deliver and superstars like six-time Festival winner Quevega, Vautour, Douvan, Hurricane Fly, Un De Sceaux and Al Boum Photo moved Closutton to the top of the league.

Lisburn native Kirk is another silent partner in what became a jump racing dream team.

Kirk and Boulard are Mullins' special agents in the bloodstock world but the final cog needed in the wheel was recruiting wealthy owners.

Just before the 2006 Festival, Mullins struck gold when Pat O'Riordan, a client of his dad's, introduced him to American banker Rich Ricci.

One of Mullins' great strengths is that he oozes charm. He's a natural front of house manager and this helped hugely in the recruitment of owners.

Three weeks before the Festival in 2006 a horse named Scotsirish became the first

Mullins-trained horse to run in Ricci and his wife Susannah's silks, in a bumper at Gowran Park. It was the start of a journey that has reaped incredible success.

Some 20 of Mullins' 94 Festival winners have been owned by Ricci, but it was those early diamonds like Champagne Fever, Douvan, Vautour and Faugheen that took Mullins and Closutton to the next level and beyond.

Other recession-proof owners like Michael O'Leary, Graham Wylie, JP McManus saw what was happening and jumped on board while in recent times Mullins has attracted super rich and super shrewd UK-based owners like Cheveley Park and the Munir & Suede partnership.

Just five years after that 2006 fiasco, Mullins was crowned leading trainer at the Festival in 2011 and hasn't looked back since, winning it for a 10th time in 2023.

Now, on the eve of the 2024 Festival, every big prize has been won, every record has been broken, but Mullins still wants more. It has inevitably led to criticism and concern that his utter domination is having

a damaging effect on National Hunt racing. In Ireland this year alone, Mullins and his superpower rival Gordon Elliott have trained over 400 winners between them - more than the next 30 trainers combined.

He could have close to 70 horses travelling to Cheltenham this year but he himself feels that opposition trainers like Elliott have driven him to become bigger and better.

"I felt that to stay relevant in the game, I have to go as big as the opposition. And that's in Ireland. To stay on par with Ireland, we built more stables. It's grown way bigger. It's a lot of work."

"What can we do? My theory in life is: If you're not going up, you're going down. "I always look at others. I learn lessons from other sports, from other trainers. I'm always amazed how some fantastic trainers get to a pitch, and then it goes down."

"I wonder why, what did they do wrong? I look at that and analyse it."

"And we come up with our own answers. Teams in any sport, why do they win two/

three All-Irelands or whatever, reach a plateau and then go down? I put that into our game."

"It's not as if we go in and plunder all the good horses. We buy our horses from a selection of areas, France, English and Irish points-to-points, bumper horses and some store (young and unbroken) horses" said Mullins. "That same option is open to everyone. Maybe we get lucky. But our team at home is good."

The 'team' is something that Mullins consistently refers to. His champion amateur son Patrick and ex-jockey David Casey are assistant trainers while Ruby Walsh still plays an important role in the Closutton dressing room.

Paul Townend took over from Walsh in 2019 and has been champion jockey every year since.

"Patrick and David do all the race planning. When they've all that done, they come back to me. And maybe we look at one and think that should be in there (a certain race)."

But it's the equine team that's the most

important and this week at Cheltenham, the Mullins lorries arrive stocked full of top talent.

Galopin Des Champs is the box office star and will attempt to win back-to-back Gold Cups on Friday, emulating Al Boum Photo who did it for Mullins in 2019 and 2020. Champion Chaser Energumene is injured but El Fabiolo looks hard to beat in Wednesday's feature while State Man's task in the Champion Hurdle looks pretty straightforward in the unfortunate absence of Constitution Hill.

Last year's Triumph Hurdle heroine Lossiemouth has the Mares' Hurdle at her mercy while novices like Ballyburn, Tullyhill, Fact To File, Readin Tommy Wrong, Embassy Gardens and Mystical Power are just half a dozen of many with big chances.

The century could come at any time but it would be apt if Galopin Des Champs were to do it in what is also the 100th running of the Cheltenham Gold Cup on Friday. Mullins is playing it down.

"It's not something anyone in racing ever



"Maybe we get lucky. But our team at home is very good"



MULLINS' 94 FESTIVAL WINS

1995 Tourist Attraction (Supreme Novices')

1996 Wither Or Which (Champion Bumper)

1996 Florida Pearl (Champion Bumper)

1998 Florida Pearl (Brown Advisory, Alexander Banquet (Champion Bumper)

2000 Joe Cullen (Champion Bumper)

2002 Scolardy (Triumph Hurdle)

2004 Rule Supreme (Brown Advisory)

2005 Missed That (Champion Bumper)

2007 Ebaziyan (Supreme Novices')

2008 Fiveforthree (Baring Bingham), Cousin Vinny (Champion Bumper)

2009 Quevega (Mares' Hurdle), Mikael D'Haguenet (Baring Bingham), Coolidine (Brown Advisory Novices' Chase)

2010 Quevega (Mares' Hurdle), Thousand County Hurdle)

2011 Hurricane Fly (Champion Hurdle), Quevega (Mares' Hurdle), Final Approach (County Hurdle, Sir Des Champs (Martin Pipe).

2012 Quevega (Mares' Hurdle) Champagne Fever (Champion Bumper), Sir Des Champs Turners)

2013 Champagne Fever (Supreme Novices' Hurdle), Hurricane Fly (Champion Hurdle), Quevega (Mares' Hurdle), Back In Focus (National Hunt Chase), 2013 Briar Hill (Champion Bumper)

2014 Vautour (Supreme Novices' Hurdle), Quevega (Mares' Hurdle), Faugheen (Champion Hurdle), Don Poli (Martin Pipe)

2015 Douvan (Supreme Novices' Hurdle), Un De Sceaux (Arkle), Faugheen (Champion Hurdle), Glens Melody (Mares' Hurdle), Don Poli (Brown Advisory), Vautour (Turners), Wicklow Brave (County Hurdle), Killultagh Vic (Martin Pipe)

2016 Douvan (Arkle), Annie Power (Champion Hurdle), Vroum Vroum Mag (Mares' Hurdle), Yorkhill (Baring Bingham), Black Hercules (Turners), Vautour (Ryanair), Limini (Mares' Novices' Hurdle)

2017 Yorkhill (Turners), Un De Sceaux (Ryanair), Nichols Canyon (Stayers' Hurdle), Let's Dance (Mares' Novices' Hurdle), Arctic Fire (County Hurdle), Penhill (Albert Bartlett)

2018 Footpad (Arkle), Benie Des Dieux (Mares' Hurdle), Rathvinden (National Hunt Chase) Bleu Berry (Coral Cup), Relegate (Champion Bumper), Penhill (Stayers' Hurdle), Laurina (Mares' Novices' Hurdle)

2019 Klassical Dream (Supreme Novices'), Duc De Genievres (Arkle), Eglantine Du Seuil (Mares' Novices' Hurdle), Al Boum Photo (Gold Cup)

2020 Ferny Hollow (Champion Bumper), Min (Ryanair), Concertista (Mares' Novices' Hurdle), Burning Victory (Triumph Hurdle), Saint Roi (County Hurdle), Monkfish (Albert Bartlett'), Al Boum Photo (Gold Cup)

2021 Appreciate It (Supreme Novices'), Monkfish (Brown Advisory), Sir Gerhard (Champion Bumper), Allaho (Ryanair Chase), Colreevy (Mares' Chase), Galopin Des Champs (Martin Pipe)

2022 Stattler (National Hunt Chase) Sir Gerhard (Baring Bingham), Energumene (Champion Chase), Facile Vega (Champion Bumper), Allaho (Ryanair) Vauban (Triumph Hurdle), State Man (County Hurdle), The Nice Guy (Albert Bartlett'), Billaway (Festival Hunters' Chase), Eilimay (Mares' Chase)

2023 El Fabiolo (Arkle), Gallard Du Mesnil (National Hunt Chase), Impaire Et Passe (Baring Bingham), Energumene (Champion Chase), Lossiemouth (Triumph Hurdle), Vauban (Triumph Hurdle), Galopin Des Champs (Gold Cup).