

Taaffe, Pat

by Desmond McCabe

Taaffe, Pat (1930–92), jump jockey and trainer, was born 9 March 1930 in Rathcoole, Co. Dublin, eldest son of Tom Taaffe, breeder and trainer. In the saddle from childhood, he accomplished his first win in 1947 on Ballincorona at the Phoenix Park racecourse, Dublin. In 1950 he contracted to ride as a professional in the Co. Dublin stables of Thomas (Tom) Dreaper (qv), remaining until the end of his racing career in December 1970. The introspective head jockey and equable trainer were well matched; Taaffe especially valued Dreaper's tact and judgment, in a business not noted for sympathetic work relations. Taaffe first came to the fore as a jockey with a slew of wins and placings on Teapot II (trained by Clem Magnier) during 1953. In July 1954 he won the Irish Grand National on Royal Approach. The following year he achieved the double, in the Irish Grand National and the Grand National at Aintree, mounted on Umm and Quare Times respectively. The aesthetics of his efficient but gawky horsemanship attracted dubious comment. Unusually tall for a jump jockey, he had to ride short, particularly in a finishing burst, giving the impression – according to one journalist – of carrying out an indecent manoeuvre ‘on a box of red hot tin tacks’ (*Times*, 8 July 1992).

His exceptional flair was quickly recognised, however. He excelled at the task of facing horses into the jump, taking them over the most formidable barriers without risk or fuss. His races were won less by frenzied work in the straight than by sensible tactics well before the finish, together with clean, reliable jumping. He suffered comparatively few serious falls in his career, recovering to ride again at different times from a fractured skull, broken leg, and damaged femur. Winning the Irish Grand National again in 1959 and 1961, he came into his prime between 1962 and 1968. This coincided, of course, with the triumphant maturity of the remarkable Irish-born and Irish-trained Arkle (1957–70). Taaffe first rode Arkle in November 1962, winning the Honeybourne Chase at Cheltenham. He was the only jockey to ride Arkle over fences, the combination proving almost invincible in the thirty-two such outings made from 1962 to 1966. He trained Arkle in steeplechasing during the off-season in 1962–3, bringing the horse to a high pitch of confidence and skill.

While fortunate to have access to such an extraordinary mount, Taaffe was also one of the few riders capable of bringing out his full potential. In the clash between Arkle and Mill House at Newbury in early 1963, a skid on landing at one of the later fences cost Arkle the race, one of the rare lapses by rider or horse in either career. In the Cheltenham Gold Cup in 1964, which was their next encounter, Taaffe struck at the second last fence to sweep irresistibly past Mill House, winning by more than five lengths and vindicating for good the rumours of his prowess. During the next two years only the various contrivances of the handicapper could put a stop to their gallop: in Ireland a dual handicap system was put into operation, one to take

effect when Arkle ran and another in 'ordinary' races. Despite the burden of extra weights, Arkle under Taaffe almost invariably won, taking the Cheltenham Gold Cup three times in succession (1964–6), winning two Hennessy Gold Cups, and once succeeding in the King George VI chase at Kempton Park. Taaffe also won the Irish Grand National in 1966 on Flyingbolt, also from the Dreaper stables. During 1964–7 he achieved forty-seven wins on horses such as Fortria, Flyingbolt, Fort Leney, Ben Stack, Muir, Straight Fort, and French Tan.

After Arkle's retirement, following an injury sustained to a bone in the foot in December 1966, Taaffe won another Cheltenham Gold Cup (1968) with Fort Leney in a breakneck finish, in 1970 captured the National Hunt two-mile champions chase and, as magnificent finale, won the Aintree Grand National on Gay Trip. By consensus he was the finest Irish National Hunt jockey in memory. Out of one hundred rides at Cheltenham he won thirty and was placed in twenty-five. In addition to his record in the Cheltenham Gold Cup and the Aintree Grand National, he won the Whitbread Gold Cup, won the Irish Grand National six times (1954, 1955, 1959, 1961, 1964, 1966), won the National Hunt two-mile champions chase five times (1960, 1961, 1964, 1966, 1970), the Leopardstown chase twice, and the Hennessy Cup twice, rode five winners in the Broadway novice chase, three winners in the Cathcart Challenge Cup, three winners in the Cotswold Chase, two winners in the Gloucester Hurdle and two winners in the National Hunt handicap chase. He won every Hunt race of consequence, and as horseman was gifted enough to have become inseparably part of the legendary career of Arkle. Retiring in December 1970, he set up a training stables in Straffan, Co. Kildare, raising horses to win the Cheltenham Gold Cup and two King George VI chases in the 1970s. He died 7 July 1992, a year after a heart transplant operation.

He married (c.1960) Molly Taaffe; they had two sons and three daughters. His eldest son, Tom Taaffe (b. 1963), was a leading Irish National Hunt jockey and in 1994 became a successful trainer.

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S. J. Watson, *Between the flags: a history of Irish steeplechasing* (1969); Marshall Cavendish, *The game: an encyclopaedia of sport* ([c.1972]), 93–4, 741, 2727 (portr.); John Welcome, *Irish horseracing: an illustrated history* (182); *Fyffes; Ir. Independent*, 11 Nov. 1991 (portr.); *Times*, 8 July 1992 (portr.); *Irish Field*, 11 July 1992 (portr.)